

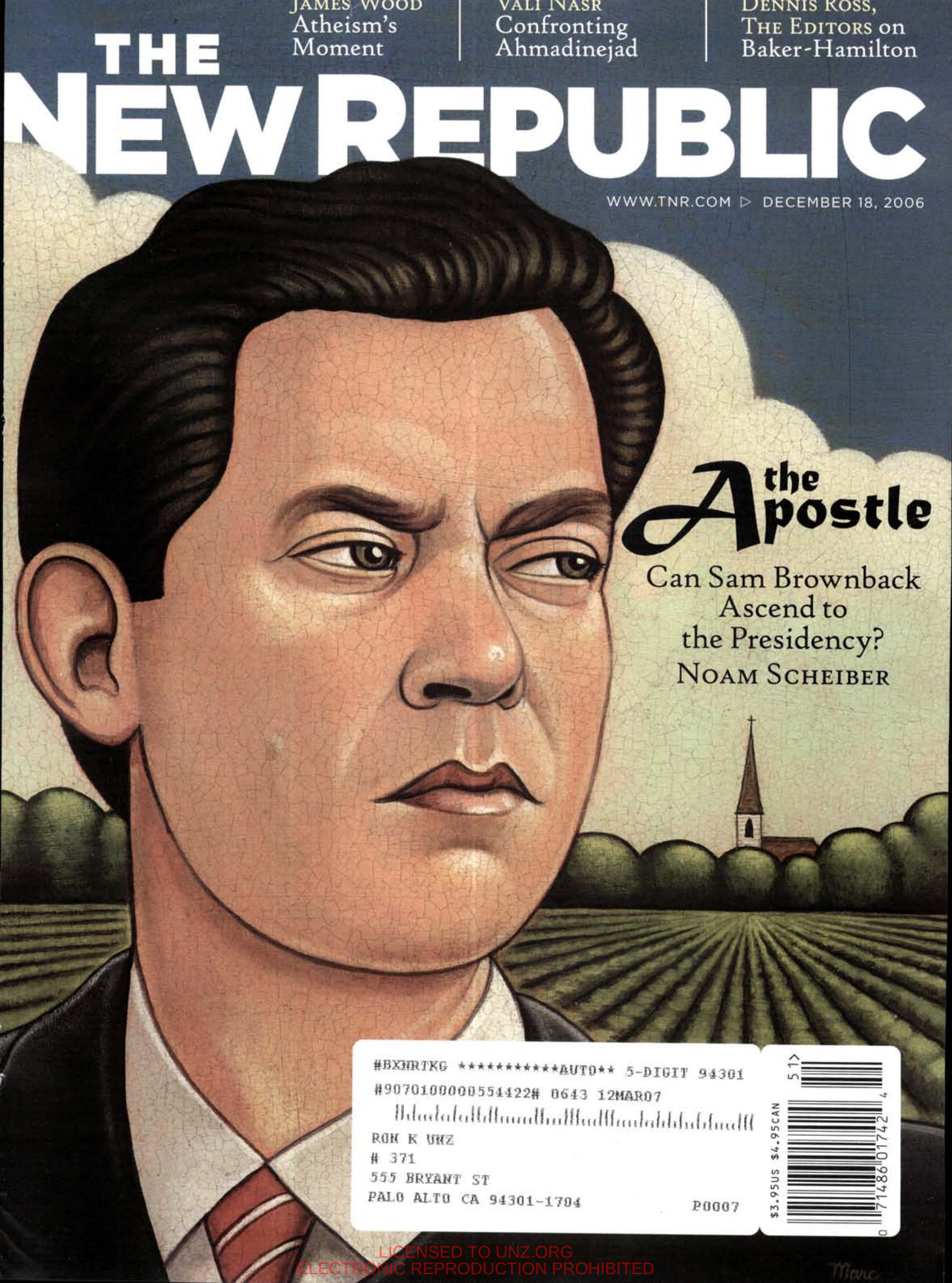
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Atheism's
Moment

VALI NASR
Confronting
Ahmadinejad

DENNIS ROSS,
THE EDITORS on
Baker-Hamilton

THE NEW REPUBLIC

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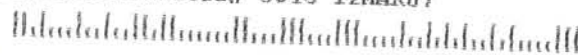


The Apostle

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Ascend to
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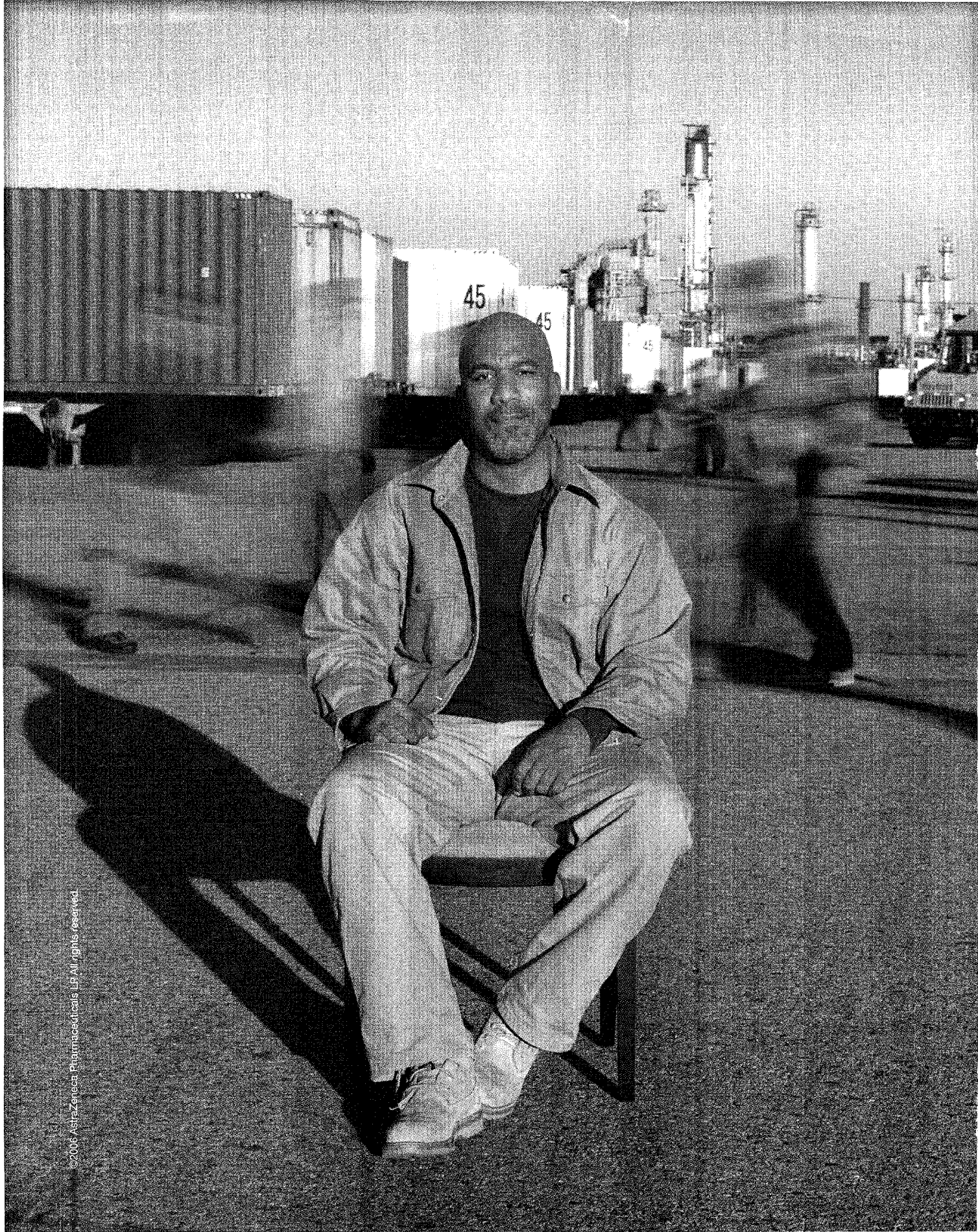
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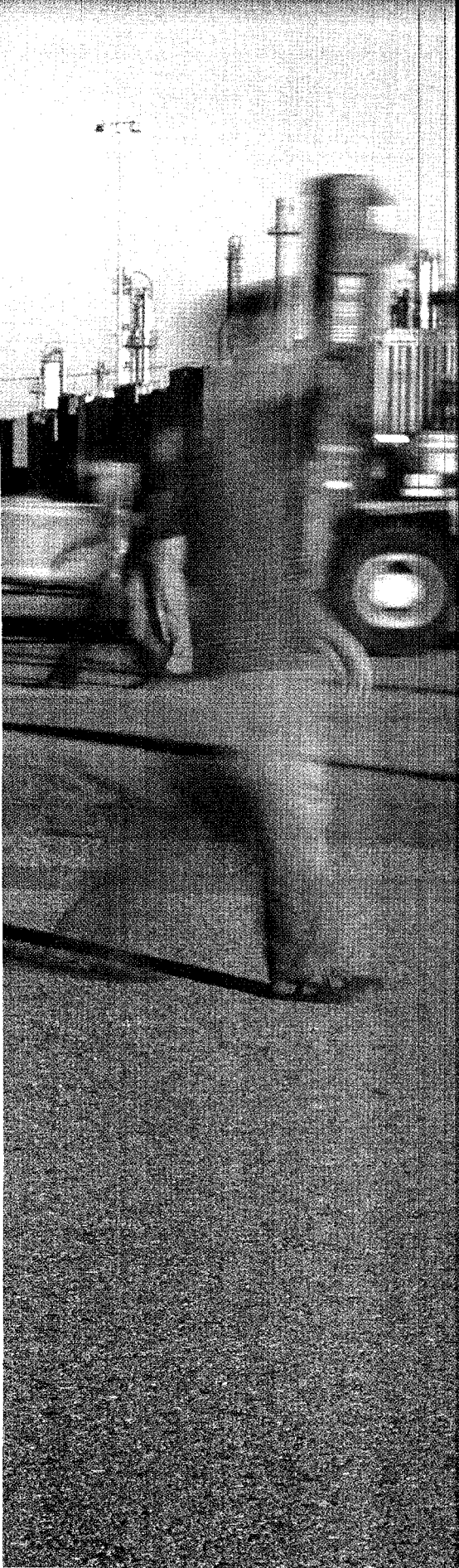
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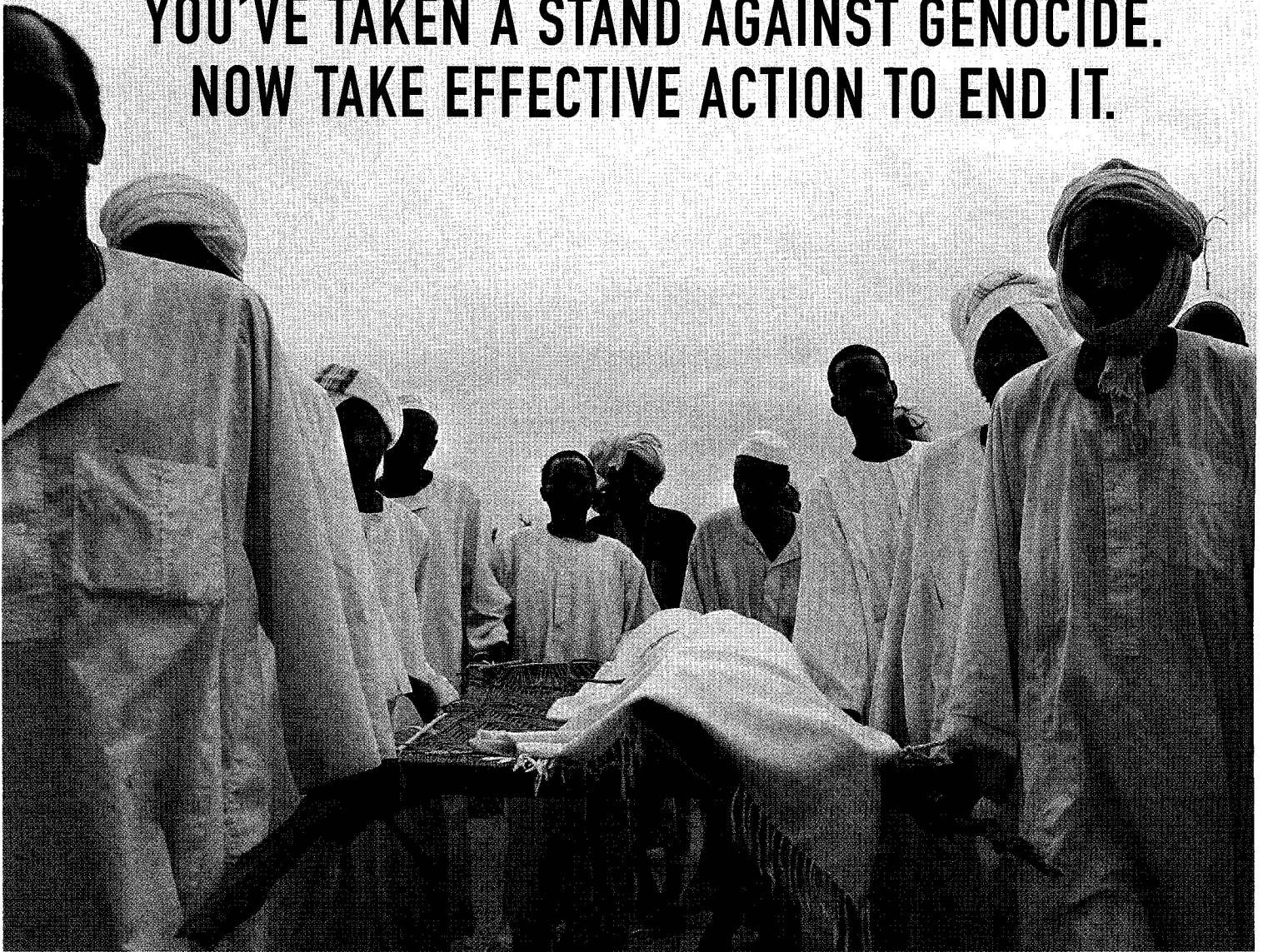
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THE NEW REPUBLIC

A JOURNAL OF POLITICS AND THE ARTS

DECEMBER 18, 2006 WASHINGTON, D.C. ISSUE 4,796 VOLUME 235

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Updated daily. On the Web at www.tnr.com.

COVER ILLUSTRATION BY Marc Burckhardt

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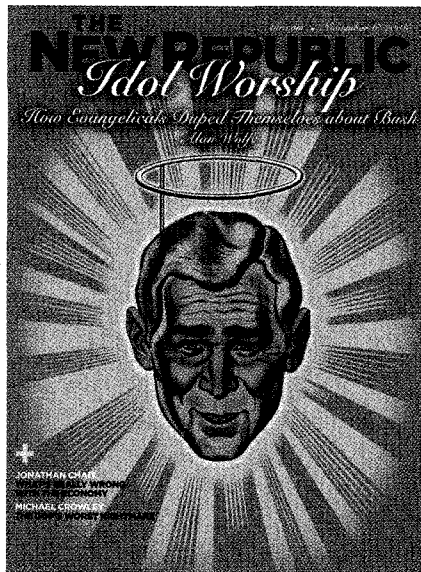
MORAL CLARITY

IN HIS EXCELLENT ARTICLE ON EVANGELICALS and the Bush administration, Alan Wolfe writes that “[m]any evangelicals insist . . . that their campaign against abortion is the moral equivalent of the abolitionist campaign against slavery” (“The God That Never Failed,” November 6). The phrase “moral equivalent” derives from William James’s 1906 essay “The Moral Equivalent of War” and is, today, widely misconstrued. James was not searching for something morally equivalent to war; instead, he meant that war is immoral and hoped, rather wistfully, for something that would have the same motivating force as war, but that, unlike war, would be moral—analogue, said James, to “the mechanical equivalent of heat.” In this context, Wolfe’s sentence has the unintended implication that there was something immoral about the abolitionist campaign against slavery. With its rigid, solipsistic notion that a zygote is a full-fledged citizen whose rights trump those of the woman in whose body it was conceived, it seems far more accurate to suggest that the campaign against abortion is the “immoral” equivalent of the campaign against slavery.

JAMES A. SHANKLAND
Orinda, California

THE OTHER SIDE

PERHAPS CENTER-LEFT ECONOMISTS are bewildered, as Jonathan Chait notes, because ideology really does prevent them from seeing the U.S. economy in its full complexity (“Freakoutonomics,” November 6). For example, the past three decades have marked the institutionalization of certain stronger regulatory measures on commerce than those that existed before the 1970s—especially in areas having to do with personnel policy, such as affirmative action and the environment. Any economist using market logic as his or her tool could have predicted that these rules would have a harsher impact on older industries that paid relatively well for unskilled labor, while leaving newer, brain-intensive technologies (and professions) comparatively unscathed. Another example: The past three decades have seen a massive increase in



the percentage of women entering the workforce; the college-educated among them have been having fewer children; social behavior has trended toward lawyers marrying lawyers and clerks marrying clerks; and the net result is a skewing of household income distribution without any particular “policy” driving the change. (Sometimes consumers and producers acting on their own really do have an effect on economic policy, without the benefit of the federal government’s actions.) Finally, there is the chronic flaw in all those pie chart-type analyses purporting to show how terrible the distribution of wealth is in the United States—the failure to relate age to wealth, income, and productivity. The indiscriminate employment of these charts by economic think tanks and their compliant friends in the mainstream media is disgraceful. Chait mentions that income-widening has not happened the same way in Europe as in the United States. Could this be because Europe is stagnant under the weight of the very tax and regulatory policies yearned for by left-wing economists? I have yet to see a political journalist explain how the United States

will avoid European outcomes, with technological innovation approaching third-rate status, with people frozen in their economic classes, and with one demographic time bomb after another ticking away under the reactionary elites running the governments. The Europeanization of the United States would have far more serious consequences for the world than has the progressive reduction of France, for instance, to the level of a tourist destination for wealth-creating Americans and Asians. Finally, if Chait thinks that the average worker’s living standards have not improved, he’s crazy. The average American’s dollar can buy more consumer goods that formerly have been available only to the affluent, and the proportion of that dollar spent on many “necessities”—food is one conspicuous example—has declined. Perhaps this helps explain why “average” voters have tended to opt for Republicans so often and why left-leaning journalists and economists are so often bewildered.

MARK RICHARD
Columbus, Ohio

MCHEINOUS

JOHAN JUDIS’S STUDY OF SENATOR John McCain’s shifting views on U.S. foreign policy suggests to me that the best way to describe his approach is that he is a contrarian (“Neo-McCain,” October 16). That is, McCain relishes opposing whatever is currently understood. This is disturbing on at least two fronts. First, it means that he does not possess a coherent view of foreign policy, and under his leadership we will be tossed about whenever the sea gets rough. Second, I am not sure that America’s long-term interests will be best served by his cutting his cloth to satisfy the fashion of the times (or to oppose what is best). The myth of McCain as a leader extraordinaire is just a myth.

GARY HOROWITZ
Frostburg, Maryland

THE NEW REPUBLIC (ISSN 0028-6593), Vol. 235, Number 25, Issue 4,796, December 18, 2006. (Printed in the United States on December 7, 2006.) Published weekly (except for combined issues dated March 20 & 27, June 3 & 10, July 10 & 17, August 14 & 21, September 11 & 18, and November 27 & December 4, 2006) at 1331 H Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20005. Telephone (202) 508-4444. For advertising inquiries, please contact: Susan Whelan at (202) 508-4444. Yearly subscriptions: \$79.97; foreign, \$119.97 (U.S. funds); Canada, \$59.97 (U.S. funds). Back issues: \$8.00 domestic and \$10.00 foreign/Canada (includes postage & handling). © 2006 by The New Republic, LLC. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, D.C., and additional mailing offices. Rights and permissions: fax (202) 628-9382. Indexed in Readers' Guide, Media Review Digest. For hard copy reprints, call (202) 508-4444. Microform, Canadian Periodical Index, and CD-ROM are available through ProQuest, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Telephone (800) 521-0600. Postmaster: Send changes of address to The New Republic, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235. Member, Audit Bureau of Circulations. Unsolicited manuscripts can be returned only if accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope (e-mail address: letters@nrr.com). For subscription inquiries or problems call (800) 827-1289 or visit our website at www.thenewrepublic.com.

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Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica votes in the October 28-29 referendum on the Constitution, a sign of Serbia's commitment to the highest standards of democracy and human rights in Europe. Serbia is holding parliamentary elections on January 21, 2007, leading to the formation of a new democratically elected government.



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We Broke It

ACROSS IDEOLOGICAL LINES, American politicians and pundits are finally coming to a consensus on Iraq: It's the Iraqis' fault. "We gave the Iraqis their freedom," pronounced liberal California Senator Barbara Boxer on November 16. "What are they doing with this freedom? They're killing each other." The next day, conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer heartily concurred, writing: "We have given the Iraqis a republic, and they do not appear able to keep it."

It's easy to see why this line of argument appeals to both left and right. For liberals, blaming the Iraqis justifies a U.S. withdrawal: If the Iraqis are incorrigible, then there's nothing U.S. troops can do. For conservatives, it excuses the Bush administration: If the Iraqis are incorrigible, this catastrophe is their fault, not ours.

It's a soothing, self-justifying argument, but it's dead wrong. The United States has not given Iraqis their freedom because freedom requires order, which the United States—from the very beginning—did not provide. And the United States has not given Iraqis a republic because a republic presupposes a state. Max Weber famously defined the state as the institution with a monopoly on legitimate violence, and, by that definition, there has been no Iraqi state since the United States invaded more than three years ago.

Shia and Sunni Iraqis are not turning on one another because of ancient, primordial hatreds. They're turning on one another because when the state fails in its most basic task—keeping you alive—you turn to any entity that can. Imagine you're in prison. The state (embodied by the prison guards) doesn't protect you, and the hallways are controlled by racial gangs. If your survival depends on it, you'll develop a neo-Nazi or Nation of Islam identity awfully fast.

That's what is happening in Baghdad today. For most of the twentieth century, while Kurds mourned the state they were denied after World War I, relations between Iraqi Sunnis and Shia were good and national identity was strong. It's true that Iraq was created from three Ottoman provinces (centered in Basra, Baghdad, and Mosul). But, as Iraqi historian Reidar Visser has observed, those



three provinces were not homogenous—each was ethnically diverse even before Iraq was born. And, once it was, in 1921, nationalism overwhelmed Sunni-Shia divisions. As Rutgers University's Eric Davis noted in his book, *Memories of State: Politics, History and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, Sunnis and Shia not only rose up jointly against the British in 1920 (along with Iraqi Christians and Jews), they actually prayed at one another's mosques. The original leader of Iraq's Baath Party—now synonymous with Sunni domination—was Shia. And, in the 1980s, 90 percent of the Iraqi troops who fought Shia Iran were—you guessed it—Shia. As Visser notes, in all of Iraqi history, the Shia South has never launched a broad-based movement to secede.

After the disastrous Iran-Iraq war, however, the Iraqi state began to weaken. War bankrupted the country, leaving it unable to maintain the welfare state it had constructed during the oil-rich 1970s. The Gulf war made things worse, as U.S. bombing decimated Iraqi infrastructure. And, in the 1990s, sanctions turned Iraq's proud middle class—the historic bulwark of Iraqi nationalism—into paupers, forced to sell their heirlooms for ration cards while Saddam Hussein built palaces. To sustain themselves, many Iraqis turned to religiously based charitable groups. When Saddam was overthrown, these religious organizations were best positioned to fill the political vacuum.

But, if Iraqi nationalism was weaker on the day we invaded than it had been two decades before, it was still quite strong. As Kenneth Pollack has noted, when the National Democratic Institute asked Iraqi focus groups in the summer of 2003 which identity suited them best, a large majority eschewed Shia, Sunni, or Kurd in favor of Iraqi. "Iraq is not the Balkans," insisted Phebe Marr, author of *The Modern History of Iraq*, in April 2003. "There really isn't

traditional enmity or hostility between Sunni and Shiite communities."

Then the United States overthrew Saddam's weak, brutal state and replaced it with virtually no state at all. In poll after poll, Iraqis said they were happy Saddam was gone but terrified at the lack of security. A Zogby survey in August 2003 found that almost 30 percent of Iraqis had friends or family killed in the war or its anarchic aftermath. Basic services like water and electricity remained scarce as the U.S. reconstruction effort foundered because of corruption and lack of security. Unemployment hit 50 percent.

In this dismal, often Hobbesian environment, those Iraqis who could (the more secular middle class) fled. Among those who remained, sectarian entrepreneurs like Moqtada Al Sadr leveraged their preexisting networks to provide services, jobs, safety, and—increasingly—revenge. As sectarian militias offered the protection that the state could not, sect began replacing nation as the primary identity of many Iraqis. That shouldn't surprise us. Identity is not static, and, in war zones, as anyone who followed Sarajevo in the '90s can attest, it can shift very fast. "Once Iraqis are safely... settled in Amman," notes Iraqi-born scholar Hala Fattah, "bonds of civility [between Sunni and Shia] reemerge."

It may be too late for the United States to provide the security required for those bonds of civility to return to Iraq. But we should, at least, have the decency to acknowledge that it was Americans (not Iraqis) who bore the responsibility under international law to provide security after Americans (not Iraqis) overthrew Saddam. It was we who failed and then handed Iraqi politicians the poisoned chalice of a government that did not sit atop a state. To be sure, Iraq's elected leaders are an uninspiring bunch. But the state fell, the army was disbanded, chaos reigned, the insurgency began, reconstruction faltered, and the die was cast in 2003—before Iraqis first went to the polls.

When Donald Rumsfeld said, as looters ransacked Baghdad while U.S. troops watched, that "freedom's untidy," Democrats rightly denounced his comments as an abdication and a disgrace. Now, more than three years later, it is just as disgraceful for Barbara Boxer to echo them. If we need to leave; we need to leave. But let's not pretend the defeat is anyone else's but our own.

PETER BEINART

Sobriety Check

THE WEATHER IN Washington changed this week. Reality finally found some honor; which is to say, it came to be accurately described in official descriptions. Even after the hyped release of the Baker-Hamilton report, it is still not clear what we should, or will, do with our faltering war in Iraq: Seventy-nine recommendations in all, the Baker-Hamilton report is not exactly a flood of clarity. But at least it is no longer defeatist or heretical or

treasonous or (the most absurd muzzle of all) cruel to the troops to articulate lucidly the magnitude of the mess in Iraq and the steady dwindling of America's power to achieve its goals. Hegemons should be especially wary of illusions. Great power, especially in the hands of idealists, demands great probity.

More than the incorrigibly self-interested James Baker and the weirdly intense Lee Hamilton, the new tone—the certification of Washington's disillusionment—was expressed most perfectly by Robert Gates, in his quick but rattling hearing for confirmation as secretary of defense. With Cheney-like calm, he buried Cheney-like fantasy. “Do you believe that we are currently winning in Iraq?” Senator Carl Levin asked the nominee. “No, sir,” the nominee replied. There was not even a whiff of controversy about the remark. Gates is not known for the originality of his thinking. He was merely stating what has become platitudinous everywhere but in the White House. We are in better-late-than-never-land. The victory talk is over. Perhaps President Bush will be unstirred by Gates's answer, or more generally by the new consensus that American anxiety has a foundation in the facts. The president has never seemed to grasp the difference between consistency and rigidity; he thinks with his spine.

Yet the Baker-Hamilton report is not remotely the intellectual salvation that some people hoped it would be. Its greatest contribution to the debate may lie in its sobriety. But beyond its sobriety is the matter of its substance. On the question of withdrawal, which is politically the most sensational question, the report is evasive. This may fit the needs of presidential candidates nicely—after all, the recent midterm elections revealed that antiwar sentiment is large but pro-withdrawal sentiment is small, at least for now—but it is not strategically useful. There is not an exit strategy in sight. As Baker was putting the finishing touches on his latest exercise in pin-striped deftness, President Bush was petulantly telling reporters that “this business about a graceful exit just simply has no realism to it at all.”

The real innovation of the Baker-Hamilton report is its call for the re-legitimation of diplomacy in the Bush era. This is a welcome departure from some of the administration's most cherished dogmas: that one does not negotiate with one's enemies; that diplomacy does not begin until its outcome is already known; that talking is not a means for getting results but a reward for getting them. (As Vali Nasr points out in these

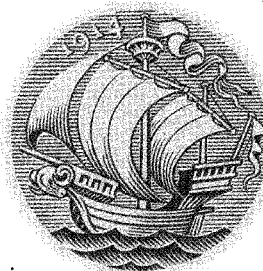
pages—see “The New Hegemon,” page 32—the United States was secretly negotiating with China even as it was at war with China's North Vietnamese clients.) But a general admiration for diplomacy is not all we need now. We need also to bear in closely upon the particular negotiations that Baker is proposing, to analyze the terms and the prospects of Baker's proposed diplomatic initiatives.

And, when one applies Baker-like realism to Baker's proposals, the picture gets even grimmer. Essentially, Baker has three diplomatic prizes in mind: Palestine, Syria, and Iran. Baker's long-held belief that there is no problem in the Middle East that does not require for its solution the immediate creation of a Palestinian state is well-documented. A Palestinian state? Sure, but not for the sake of pacifying Anbar province. The road to Baghdad does not lead through Ramallah. As for Syria: Who knows, it would certainly be a smart move for Bashar Assad to agree to be flipped, and, if Muammar Qaddafi could be flipped, almost anybody can. But a new and constructive Syrian role in the region would improve the Iraqi imbroglio

only at the margins; and, while Baker is dreaming of Assad, Assad is murdering Pierre Gemayel. Is delivering Lebanon to Syria really our idea of a carrot? As for Iran: It concentrates the mind, certainly.

Baker is proposing talks with Tehran, and—given Iran's impact upon Iraq, its regional ambition, and its nuclear program—it would be foolhardy not to see what they could bring. But such talks are the beginning of a long road, and Iraq is burning.

So we have cleared the ground of a lot of the rubbish, and now we can see how much is not there. ■



On the Hill Whip It Good

BY EVE FAIRBANKS

INSIDE THE REPUBLICAN senators' November 15 closed-door meeting to pick their leaders for the next Congress, minority whip candidate Lamar Alexander had reason to feel good. His nominators had given enthusiastic pitches, and he had been campaigning hard for the job for nearly a year. Meanwhile, his opponent, Trent Lott, had entered the race just a week earlier—and was perceived to be damaged goods, having been spectacularly deposed from the leadership in December 2002 after he made a racially charged quip at his buddy Strom Thurmond's one-hundredth birthday party. But then, Oregon Senator Gordon Smith rose to give a nominating speech for Lott. Smith's address was deeply emotional: He described Lott's honorable character and talked about the possibility of redemption. He even quoted from Mark Antony's funeral oration in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. The room fell silent; Lott wept. When the doors opened, Lott had been elected minority whip by a single vote.

"The evil that men do lives after them," Antony famously laments. Not so with Trent Lott. Four years ago, after Lott said that "we wouldn't have had all these problems" if the segregationist Thurmond had become president, his colleagues abandoned him, and—in the unkindest cut of all—his own protégé, Bill Frist, seized his majority leader post. Given all this, his reinstatement seems miraculous. According to a friend of Lott's familiar with the election proceedings, the senators chose Lott for whip because they felt he "harkened back to another era." How did this Lott nostalgia develop? After all, they once dumped him precisely for expressing some misplaced nostalgia of his own.

INSTEAD OF BEING bitter, Lott returned to Washington after the 2002 winter recess with a great big smile—and a brash attitude that brought his successor's timidity into high relief. Frist, who was handpicked by the White House, dutifully looked there for his cues and refused to ruffle any feathers in the hopes of running for president himself. "There was a beef in the Senate that Frist didn't tell anybody 'no,'" says a Republican who works regularly with the senators. In contrast, his party's painful rejection set Lott free. He delighted the press with ballsy, even mischievous quotes (when Harriet Miers withdrew her Supreme Court nomination, he warbled "Happy Days Are Here Again") and toyed with becoming a reformer, teaming up with Democrat Ron Wyden to try to end the Senate practice of anonymously blocking bills. "Lott was the most liberated man in Washington after he had to step down as leader. Nothing could hurt his feelings. I think he was enjoying it,"

says lobbyist Ed Rogers, a longtime friend of Lott's.

The apotheosis of Lott's new style came in 2005, when he was able to dance in and out of the nasty fight over judicial nominations as he pleased. He worked on a compromise to avoid the dreaded "nuclear option" that would have changed Senate rules to disable filibusters; then he publicly gave up on it; then, at the appeal of Senator John McCain, he slipped into McCain's office through a side door to give the deadlocked Gang of 14 a crucial pep talk that helped lead to an agreement. "[Lott] has really enjoyed bringing sides together, being a dealmaker, with no visible skin in the game," says a former Republican Senate aide. "He seems complete now."

As the GOP's 2006 prospects got gloomier, nostalgia for Lott's reign began to take shape. Whereas Frist had used his leadership to cement ties between Senate Republicans and the White House, Lott had used the loss of his leadership to establish his independence from the administration. By the time Michael Brown bungled Hurricane Katrina and Bush's numbers began to tank, the latter strategy seemed like the wiser one, and Lott was being remembered not as a damage-control disaster with a big mouth but as a notably effective leader. "I think [Lott's] colleagues looked at him and basically said, 'This would be a great time to have somebody a little more concerned about us and a little less concerned about them,'" says über-pundit Norman Ornstein.

Indeed, several close to Lott report that, after Katrina (which flattened his Pascagoula, Mississippi home) convinced him not to retire, more than one senator asked him to run for leadership—and not for whip, either. There was even some soul-searching about how the party had treated him. "With the benefit of time, some [Republican senators] thought he was unfairly pooped-upon" in 2002, says a Republican Senate leadership aide.

Lott didn't shy away from fanning the ardor with coyness: "I want to keep it dangling out there to keep everyone uneasy," he said of running for leadership in December 2005. But, as the election approached, Lott began an under-the-radar campaign for whip in which his allies—who included McCain and Arizona Senator Jon Kyl—began "talking to others and asking them not to commit," says the former Senate aide. He delicately refused to formally declare his intentions, however, until his friend Rick Santorum, who also wanted to be whip, was officially defeated. This contrasted with the striving Alexander, who started campaigning early, announced he had a majority of votes, and began naming names—which was seen as presumptuous.

BY THE TIME the Republican senators collected in the Capitol to elect their next leadership team, the tide of the moment was poised to carry Lott back into power: Depressed by electoral defeat, Republicans were less interested in fresh leadership than might have been expected—as reform House leadership candidate Mike Pence noted after his crushing loss, Republicans had been so badgered by Democrats talking about "change" during the campaign that they were sick of the word. "Once

Senate Republicans went into the minority, they thought a different skill set was needed," says another former Senate aide. Perhaps the most important skill that Lott offered was a political survival instinct that might finally allow the GOP to stop propping up the Bush administration and prop up themselves instead.

But there was one last deeper, more psychological reason why the Republican senators would want to restore Lott's crown. Smith's moving speech reminded them of an object lesson: Tragedy had befallen Lott, in the form of the Strom episode and Katrina, and he had come back fighting, a stronger and better person than before. It was a particularly resonant journey for the senators, now hoping to redeem themselves from their own electoral fall from grace. As Smith's speech reached its finale, Senator Bob Bennett, who had nominated Alexander, began to cross out the names on his list of possible Alexander votes. And so, somewhat amazingly, Lott finally regained power not in spite of his disastrous comment, but because of it. ■

Mandela, diamond shill. Half Nelson

BY ISAAC CHOTINER

AFTER EDWARD ZWICK returned from Mozambique and Sierra Leone this June, he received a letter from Nelson Mandela. Zwick, the director of *Glory*, had traveled to Africa to film *Blood Diamond*, the story of the civil war that ravaged Sierra Leone during the 1990s.

The movie—which centers around a father and son who are enslaved by rebels and stars Leonardo DiCaprio as a cynical diamond smuggler—is fiction, but the context is historically accurate: From 1991 to 2002, rebel soldiers from the brutal Revolutionary United Front kidnapped civilians, forced them to work in diamond mines, and smuggled the gems they unearthed to neighboring countries. From there, the diamonds were shipped to Europe and sold by conglomerates, such as De Beers. The proceeds filtered back to Sierra Leone, where they paid for even more kidnapping and violence. *Blood Diamond* is a withering critique of the diamond industry's role in exacerbating a savage war and its callous disregard for human rights in Africa. Zwick had every reason to expect that Mandela—one of the world's greatest living advocates for human rights—would be pleased.

He wasn't. In his letter to Zwick, Mandela wrote that "it would be deeply regrettable if the making of the film inadvertently obscured the truth, and, as a result, led the world to believe that an appropriate response might be to cease buying mined diamonds from Africa. ... We hope that the

desire to tell a gripping and important real life historical story will not result in the destabilization of African diamond producing countries, and ultimately their peoples." None of this makes much sense, unless you take into consideration something that isn't widely known about Mandela: The man who ended apartheid and became the late twentieth century's most eloquent spokesman for human dignity is also a shill for the diamond industry.

MANDELA'S AFFINITY FOR De Beers and other diamond companies is the result of both geography and personal relationships. South Africa produces more than \$1 billion in diamonds per year; and, even though Mandela's African National Congress had significant Marxist and communist elements, the party proved broadly supportive of the diamond industry once it took power. In addition, there was Mandela's friendship with Harry Oppenheimer, the late chairman of De Beers—who, as white South African businessmen went, was relatively sympathetic to the anti-apartheid movement. Oppenheimer encouraged the creation of black trade unions and funded a political party specifically to oppose South Africa's racial disparities. Mandela and Oppenheimer became close before Mandela's presidency and would grow even closer: After Mandela's election, Oppenheimer frequently hosted him at his luxurious estate. Mandela was also known to bring De Beers representatives on foreign trips.

By the late '90s, political pressure was mounting on De Beers—which, at the time, controlled 70 percent of the world diamond market—to stop the flow of "conflict diamonds" from Sierra Leone. (The phrase typically refers to diamonds whose sale is used to finance warfare.) Conflict diamonds had already helped fund Angola's bloody civil war, and they began to play an equally devastating role in Sierra Leone. (In 2000, Ryan Lizza documented in these pages the Clinton administration's bungled efforts to broker peace in that West African country.) Human rights organizations called for steps to ensure that conflict diamonds did not reach the world market.

Still, Mandela spoke up for diamond manufacturers. "The diamond industry is vital to the South African and southern African economy," he said at the time, echoing De Beers's statements. "We would be concerned that an international campaign on these issues did not damage this vital industry." Moreover, Mandela made clear that the industry's stance on human rights should be taken through its "own initiative." When, in 2000, U.S. Representative Tony Hall pushed a bill that would have forced all diamonds sold in the United States for more than \$100 to be accompanied by a certificate naming the country of the stone's origin, a diamond executive testifying before Congress used Mandela's words to argue that such a measure would harm diamond-producing countries. "Former President Nelson Mandela has expressed concern that his nation's vital diamond industry is not damaged by 'an international campaign,'" Eli Haas, president of the Diamond Dealer's Club, told a House subcommittee.

Eventually, in 2002, under an agreement known as the Kimberley Process, diamond companies agreed to ensure that all diamonds came from legally mined fields and that the proceeds did not go to fomenting civil wars. But it remains unclear how much good the Kimberley Process is actually doing. A recent U.N. report found that conflict diamonds from Côte d'Ivoire are entering the market through Ghana and Mali, and a study by USAID estimates that as many as half of the diamonds emanating from Sierra Leone are still being smuggled out illegally. The problem, according to experts, is that the Kimberley Process does not have any independent verification or enforcement mechanisms. "The diamond industry doesn't ask many questions," says Corinna Gilfillan of Global Witness, an NGO focused on natural-resource exploitation. "They're just looking to get the best deal."

And yet, Mandela has continued to lend his support. He recently penned a note praising De Beers on its community service work. "I congratulate De Beers, a world leader in diamonds, with its roots in South Africa, for the way it continues to demonstrate its credentials as a good corporate citizen in so many areas of concern," he wrote. The letter, unsurprisingly, appears in De Beers's corporate brochures.

THE DIAMOND INDUSTRY'S campaign against *Blood Diamond* is just the latest phase, then, in an ongoing fight to stave off bad publicity and increased scrutiny. Zwick (who once interned at THE NEW REPUBLIC) received a letter earlier this year expressing concern about the project from the chairman of the Kimberley Process and the head of the World Diamond Council (WDC), an industry group that represents major diamond companies. The WDC also hired Sitrick and Company, a p.r. firm that specializes in crisis management. And, in June, a *Los Angeles Times* blog reported that Sitrick had enlisted—surprise—Mandela to respond to publicity generated by the film's release. (A spokesman for the WDC disputes this, saying that the former South African president is speaking out on his own.)

Mandela's pronouncements on behalf of the diamond industry are, at some level, perfectly understandable. After all, he was president of South Africa, and part of any president's job is to look out for his country's economy. But Mandela is not regarded as one of the twentieth century's heroes because of his diligent pursuit of South Africa's narrow national interests; rather, he owes his stature to his decades-long campaign against apartheid, a campaign that appealed to universal values like human rights and freedom. By covering for the diamond industry during the '90s—at a time when diamond producers were helping to fund brutality in Sierra Leone—Mandela was putting his country's narrow interests above these universal ones; and, today, he continues to do the same. "Truth and reconciliation—it's all rubbish," says DiCaprio's character to an idealistic journalist in *Blood Diamond*. Of course, Nelson Mandela wouldn't agree. But, by shilling for the diamond industry, he is enabling those who do. ■

Don't count on Iran and Syria. Internal Affairs

BY DENNIS ROSS

PRESIDENT BUSH AND his advisers were not the only ones who were anxious about what the Iraq Study Group would recommend. So were the Saudis, which explains why they sought an urgent meeting between King Abdullah and Vice President Cheney in late November. The source of Saudi anxiety was almost certainly the widely held assumption that, to help fix Iraq, the Baker-Hamilton Commission would counsel reaching out to Iran and Syria, both of which Riyadh regards as regional rivals. And, this week, that is exactly what the commission did, urging the Bush administration to "engage directly with Iran and Syria in order to try to obtain their commitment to constructive policies toward Iraq and other regional issues."

Should the Saudis—and the rest of us—be worried? Not if the administration understands why and how any engagement with Iran and Syria should unfold. Iran and Syria can both be spoilers in Iraq, but neither is the key to Iraqi stability. While engagement with both countries could represent prudent foreign policy, no one should expect that reaching out to Tehran and Damascus will prove central to fixing Iraq. The same goes for the commission's recommendation that the administration seek to jump-start the Arab-Israeli peace process: It may be a wise move for other reasons, and it certainly can't hurt our efforts in Iraq, but it isn't going to make an enormous difference there. That's because, ultimately, the problems we face today come from within Iraq, not outside it.

THE KEY CHALLENGE in Iraq right now is to convince the country's leaders that, if they take basic steps toward national reconciliation, we will stay—and, if they don't, we won't. In effect, we have to use the threat of our departure to get Iraqis to make the decisions they have avoided for the last three-and-a-half years on the most contentious issues: sharing oil revenue, granting amnesty to Baathists and insurgents, settling the relationship between Islam and the state, and determining the scope of autonomy in the provinces. Here, the commission has it right: We can and should exert leverage, but, in the end, whether or not to act will be up to Iraqis themselves.

It would be unrealistic to expect Syria and Iran to help

Former Ambassador Dennis Ross is Counselor and Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of THE MISSING PEACE: THE INSIDE STORY OF THE FIGHT FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE.

much in moving this process along. The Syrians didn't create the insurgency in Anbar province, and the insurgents do not depend significantly on material and manpower coming across the Syrian border. Similarly, while the Iranians certainly played a role in building the Mahdi Army and the Badr Organization, neither of these Shia militias currently depends on Iran to function. Within Iraq, sectarian violence has taken on a life of its own.

This does not mean Iraq's neighbors have nothing to contribute. Clearly, involving all of them, including the Iranians and Syrians, could be a device to influence the choices of different factions within Iraq. But this is not a given: While all of Iraq's neighbors may fear its collapse and the flight of millions of refugees, they may also hedge their bets and try to forge their own bastions of influence inside the country at the expense of their regional competitors. This ought to tell us that, if we are contemplating a conference of Iraq's neighbors—or creating what the commission calls an “Iraq International Support Group”—we need to prepare its agenda and aims very carefully. Will the group's decisions need to be unanimous? Will Iraq's neighbors be asked to make certain commitments? Will there be a mechanism for ensuring that countries are fulfilling their promises?

In this regard, Iran and Syria should be treated as part of a collective. Singling them out gives them more of a reason to be spoilers and to up the ante for what they seek in return. We want the focus with each of them to be Iraq—not the nuclear issue with Iran, or Lebanon and the Golan Heights with Syria. The more we treat them as fixers in Iraq—when, in fact, they are not—the more they will seek trade-offs on other issues. I am not arguing against engaging either the Iranians or Syrians. But it should be done on terms that don't favor them so clearly. We should be prepared to raise the costs to them practically, not only rhetorically, when it comes to their bad behavior. To date, with both Iran and Syria, we have been speaking loudly and carrying a small stick. This needs to change.

AS FOR THE Israelis and Palestinians: I agree with the Iraq Study Group's call for a new, more activist U.S. diplomacy on the issue, even if I find some of its recommendations misguided or poorly worded. (For example, Palestinian refugees are a final status issue, but the “right of return” is not and, stated this way, would prejudice negotiations.) It has been a mistake for the Bush administration to disengage from the conflict. But our efforts now should be guided by what Israelis and Palestinians need, rather than by the illusion that Sunni Arab leaders won't help on Iraq otherwise. A collapse in Iraq is a disaster for them. The Saudis aren't contemplating a \$12 billion security fence along their northern border because they have no stake in Iraq. The Jordanians know only too well that they cannot absorb hundreds of thousands more Iraqi refugees.

We ought to try to cement a real—not flimsy and vague—cease-fire between Israelis and Palestinians; or push for a national referendum among Palestinians to clarify where

they stand on peace and to build a mandate for a new Palestinian government to pursue it; or reestablish an international consensus on the principles of a credible two-state solution at a time when Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas reject the basic terms of co-existence. We should do these things because they are right, and we should do them in a way that is realistic. Acting boldly, as the Iraq Study Group recommends, is less important than acting wisely. The last thing we need is an ambitious initiative that proves to be hollow and only succeeds in further discrediting diplomacy and strengthening those who argue that violence is the answer. Whatever steps we take in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, let's take them with our eyes open and not because we think they will help us save Iraq. They won't. ■

The new integration. Stay Classy

BY RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG

FOR DECADES, CONSERVATIVES have been waiting for the moment when the Supreme Court would act decisively to curtail the use of race in education. With Justice Samuel Alito having replaced Sandra Day O'Connor, that moment may finally have arrived.

This week, the Court heard arguments in a pair of cases pitting white parents against school districts in Seattle, Washington, and Louisville, Kentucky, which use race as a factor in determining which schools children attend. The parents claim that this violates the proposition in *Brown v. Board of Education* that students should not be treated differently because of skin color. Advocates of the school policies, including civil rights groups, say that, under *Brown*, schools have a right to consider race because integration improves academic achievement and fosters better relations between races. In *Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003), the Court upheld the use of race to promote diversity in higher education; but conservatives believe that, with Alito as a potential fifth vote, it may reverse course. This would affect hundreds of school districts that currently have racial integration plans similar to those of Seattle and Louisville and may also have implications for affirmative action at selective colleges and universities.

If the Court decides that schools can no longer take race into consideration, those who care about social justice will

Richard D. Kahlenberg is a senior fellow at The Century Foundation and the author of ALL TOGETHER NOW: CREATING MIDDLE-CLASS SCHOOLS THROUGH PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE. This article is adapted from a Century Foundation idea brief, “A New Way on School Integration.”

need to find another way to promote equal educational opportunity. Luckily, roughly 40 school districts have been trying a new approach—income-based school integration. Because of the overlap between race and economic status, this policy produces a healthy amount of racial diversity. At the same time, even opponents of using race in student assignment concede that using socioeconomic status is perfectly legal. Moreover, socioeconomic integration provides an even more powerful lever for raising achievement.

WAKE COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA, which encompasses Raleigh, is a large and growing district with a diverse population. In the early '80s, Wake County voluntarily integrated its schools by race, largely through a system of magnet schools. But, by the late '90s, with pressure to raise achievement and to avoid legal challenges to the use of race, Wake officials began talking about trying something different.

Even for liberals, the system of integrating students by race has had its drawbacks. For one thing, it can appear to insultingly imply that black students need to sit next to whites to learn or that “too many” black kids make for a bad learning environment. For another, it hasn't always improved black achievement. Under racial desegregation plans, for example, black student scores rose in Charlotte, North Carolina, but not in Boston, Massachusetts. But discrepancies like these reveal a clue as to what *does* work. The difference between Charlotte and Boston is that in Charlotte, poor blacks had a chance to go to school with middle-class whites; whereas in Boston, poor blacks were mixed with poor whites. The answer isn't race—it's class.

Studies going back 40 years have found that the socioeconomic status of the school a child attends is, after family economic status, the most powerful predictor of academic achievement. Indeed, the positive influence of having a middle-class school environment is the central reason why racial desegregation often improves black achievement. As Harvard Professor Gary Orfield notes, “Educational research suggests that the basic damage inflicted by segregated education comes not from racial concentration but from the concentration of children from poor families.”

Consider, for example, peer influences. It is a disadvantage to have classmates who misbehave, cut class, miss school, engage in violence, watch excessive television, drop out, and fail to go on to college. Research finds that all these behaviors track much more closely by economic class than by race. There is powerful evidence that even the widely discussed phenomenon in black communities of denigrating academic achievement as “acting white” is, in fact, a phenomenon more deeply rooted in class—common among low-income students of all races.

Evidence like this convinced officials in Wake County to give income-based integration a try. Starting in 2000, they began to assign students—largely through public school choice and redrawn school lines—to ensure that no school had more than 40 percent of students eligible for subsidized

lunch (an indicator of low parental income) or more than 25 percent of students achieving below grade level.

The results have been promising. In 2005, low-income and minority students substantially outperformed comparable students in large North Carolina districts that have greater concentrations of school poverty. Other districts using socioeconomic integration, like La Crosse, Wisconsin, have also seen rising academic achievement.

Of course, schools are about more than boosting test scores. In a nation made up of peoples from all across the world, U.S. public schools have a special role in promoting tolerance and social cohesion—so racial integration is an important goal, whatever its effect on academic achievement. But on this score, too, Wake's socioeconomic program has been a success. Under a previous racial integration policy, in the 1999–2000 school year, 64.6 percent of Wake County schools met guidelines providing that all schools should be between 15 and 45 percent minority. Two years later, under the new socioeconomic integration policy, 63.3 percent of schools met those targets.

Socioeconomic integration should produce substantial amounts of racial integration beyond Wake County. Begin with the fact that black and other minority students are almost three times as likely to be low income as white students. Moreover, because of housing discrimination, poor blacks are more likely to live in concentrated poverty and attend high-poverty schools than poor whites. The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University found that, in the 2003–2004 school year, 76 percent of predominantly minority schools were high poverty, compared with only 15 percent of predominately white schools.

THE HARDER QUESTION is what to do when the circle can't be neatly squared. What about a district that has a large black middle-class population, or a substantial low-income white population, where socioeconomic integration alone does not produce sufficient racial integration? Rather than rule definitively against the use of race, the U.S. Supreme Court would be wise to allow school districts to employ it as a last resort—a policy used in the Cambridge, Massachusetts, public schools. Cambridge seeks to integrate students principally by socioeconomic status, but it reserves the right to also make race a determinative factor if socioeconomic integration does not produce sufficient racial diversity. In the four years since Cambridge adopted the socioeconomic model, economic integration has, by itself, brought racial diversity, and no student has been denied a spot because of race.

But unlike Seattle and Louisville, which go directly to using race in student assignment, Cambridge attacks the fountainhead of inequality—the separation of rich and poor. An emphasis on socioeconomic integration addresses, at long last, issues of educational inequality at their most profound level. If the Court strikes down the use of race, socioeconomic integration is likely to be the best way to produce racial integration as well. ■

The many conversions of Sam Brownback.

The Apostle

BY NOAM SCHEIBER

IT'S A TUESDAY in mid-October 2005, and Kansas Senator Sam Brownback is chairing a meeting of a little-known but highly influential Senate group called the Values Action Team (VAT). Think of it as a PTA board for the vast right-wing conspiracy: The Concerned Women for America has a standing invitation, as do the Family Research Council, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the National Right to Life Committee. The activists sit around a conference table in the Capitol building and plot strategy on matters like broadcast decency, Internet gambling, and anti-abortion legislation.

Typically, the group's weekly meetings draw 50 to 75 conservative activists. Today, however, there are well over 100 people crowded into the stately room. It's been two weeks since George W. Bush named Harriet Miers to fill a Supreme Court vacancy, and the nomination has flagged. So much so that, in the days before this meeting, the White House has readied plans for a renewed push. Brownback has long stated his opposition to Miers, but, as a gesture of goodwill, he's invited former Senator Dan Coats, Miers's steward on the Hill, to appear before the group. The activists are, if anything, even less generous than Brownback. Many have turned up just to watch the poor man squirm.

Coats makes the case for Miers as best he can: *She was a managing partner of a big Texas firm. She'll be a reliable vote for the things you believe in.* Then someone pipes up with an ominously simple question: Why did the president nominate Miers in the first place? Coats pauses for a moment before allowing, "I think neither the White House nor the members of the Senate wanted to make a nomination that would start a culture war." Wrong answer! "Everyone in that room, they *are* the culture war," Manny Miranda, one of the conservatives at the meeting, recalls thinking. The activists are furious. Several fume that Coats doesn't understand how judicial fights have changed in the years since he left the Hill.

Minutes pass before Brownback invokes an implicit slaughter rule. "Well, Dan, you've got some good feedback you can take back to the White House for when they choose their next nominee," he says. Though he is painstakingly polite, it appears he has just pronounced the Miers nomination dead. The activists look at one another and scratch their heads. *Can he really do that?* Belatedly, Brownback picks up on the implication of his statement and offers a qualification: "Of course, I don't mean that's going to happen any time soon."

Of all the GOP presidential contenders who could claim

to have benefited from the recent midterm elections, Brownback may be the one for whom it is most true. For years, the social conservatives who brought down Miers have been having a fierce intramural debate on the merits of pragmatism versus purity. In the run-up to 2000, they resolved that debate in favor of the former, and the movement threw its support behind George W. Bush over conservative long shots like John Ashcroft and Gary Bauer. But, now, conservatives appear to have the worst of both worlds: Six years of disappointments on issues like abortion and gay marriage have resulted in a midterm rout and a lame-duck presidency. Purity is looking more attractive by the day.

All the more so when you consider that the early GOP front-runner is John McCain, a man who still makes some social conservatives sputter with rage. If present trends continue and the Republican establishment embraces McCain, conservatives could choose to rally around a more acceptable alternative—that is, if they can find one. Lame-duck Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist has already pulled the plug on his presidential ambitions. As of January, Pennsylvania's Rick Santorum and Virginia's George Allen are both ex-senators. And, while Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney may have escaped the midterm fallout, he is Mormon—a religion many evangelical Christians regard as a cult.

Brownback, by contrast, is closing in on a decade as the leading social conservative in the U.S. Senate. He has impeccable credentials on issues like judges, abortion, and gay marriage. (And, for that matter, any combination of the three: He has threatened to hold up the nomination of a Michigan judge because she once attended a lesbian commitment ceremony.) And Brownback's leadership of the VAT gives him extraordinary day-to-day influence over the Senate's social conservative agenda.

There are crasser considerations, too. Brownback was an evangelical Christian before he converted to Catholicism. Iowa has large populations of both. Brownback's home in Topeka is a four-hour drive from Des Moines, giving him as close to a natural foothold in the state as any GOP contender will have. And, as a long-serving state agriculture secretary and former Future Farmers of America official, Brownback is as fluent in the language of ethanol subsidies and biodiesel production as any politician reared outside Iowa. Put this together, and you have a guy who could theoretically take one of the top two spots in the state's first-in-the-nation caucuses. With the Internet's track record of making juggernauts out of grassroots icons, even a third-place finish could give Brownback an E-Z Pass lane straight

through to the final stages of the race. If everything breaks right, and social conservatives are particularly aggrieved over their party's standard bearer, Brownback could end up on the national ticket.

Brownback, in other words, is on the brink. He is savvy. He is righteous. He is committed. He would appear to have been born for this moment in politics. But looks can be deceiving, because birth is not at all how Brownback came by his place in the conservative cosmos. As recently as 1994, the year of his first campaign for Congress, Brownback was a member in good standing of the moderate Republican establishment. But, by the time he arrived in Congress that fall, he was emitting so much anti-government zeal he gave Newt Gingrich the willies. Within two years, Brownback had another epiphany, from which he emerged as a crusader for Christian causes.

Which raises a question for conservatives mulling a Brownback candidacy: Has the Kansas senator been finding himself? Or has he been finding himself a way to run for president?

IN MID-OCTOBER, I trailed Brownback through the Republican precincts of northwestern Iowa. The first stop was an unexpectedly frou-frou bistro in a town called Spirit Lake, where some 50 locals showed up for partisan red meat. What they got was more like mixed greens. Brownback opened with a riff about growing up in the "suburbs" of tiny Parker, Kansas, where his parents still mind a 1,400-acre farm. It took him several minutes to even mention Nancy Pelosi. When he finally did, he felt compelled to stipulate that "she represents her district well."

All in all, it sounded a lot like the way I imagine the young Sam Brownback sounded: humble, warm, gracious—and moderate. My mind drifted to a story I'd heard from Tim Golba, a former president of Kansans for Life, who'd met with Brownback in 1994 to discuss a possible primary endorsement. According to Golba, it quickly became clear that there was little to discuss. Brownback was not only unfamiliar with the anti-abortion lexicon, he had a habit of dropping the hints used by politicians on the other side. "I think you'll find me more in line with the view of Nancy Kassebaum," he told Golba, who still grumbles at the mention of the famously moderate Kansas senator.

For the most part, though, it's not the continuity between the young Brownback and today's Brownback that is striking: It's the change. Because the longer Brownback goes on, the more you sense a distinct lack of passion for standard Iowa fare like agriculture policy or the budget. Compared with the previous speaker, local Congressman Steve King, he's not even worked up about Iraq. What Sam Brownback clearly wants to talk about—what he thinks people need to know about—are the issues you might store in a mental file called "Judgment Day." The Judgment Day file begins with standard culture-war causes like gay marriage and abortion. But it is a sprawling file, and, before long, it sprawls to such far-flung locales as Sudan and the Congo, where

Brownback wants to stop genocide and human trafficking. "We're a great nation," Brownback says. His voice is still composed, but now there's a firmness that wasn't there before. "And I believe, in my heart, that for our greatness to continue, our goodness must continue."

It is a long journey, this trip from heartland moderate to Judgment Day conservative. The crowd at Spirit Lake isn't entirely sure what to make of it. The self-deprecating comments, they can laugh at. The partisan comments, they can cheer. But this culture-war stuff. This *Africa* stuff. ... I am seated next to a group of local businessmen, including two with name tags that read BANK MIDWEST. A few minutes ago, they were sporting Chamber of Commerce grins and clapping Chamber of Commerce claps. Now they just stare ahead, blankly.

There is a final thing you notice about Sam Brownback these days. The early accounts all depict a young man in a hurry. When he began high school, Brownback had—not quite a speech impediment, but a tendency to garble his words. He spent his afternoons working with a teacher named Marvin Creager until the tic had surrendered to his will. During his senior year, Brownback won a standing ovation at the state Future Farmers of America convention, where the delegates made him their president. When he applied for an internship at the local radio station in college, the station's manager, Ralph Titus, asked whether Brownback planned to go into broadcasting. "He said, 'No, I'm going to be president of the United States,'" recalls Titus. "I laughed. He did not."

It was a pattern that continued throughout early adulthood. "You always got the impression he was studying, prepping," says Will Gunn, who met Brownback when they were White House Fellows in the early '90s. The day Bob Dole resigned his Senate seat in 1996, a seat Brownback would soon claim, the freshman congressman strode into the chamber and schmoozed his future colleagues so extravagantly that the chamber had to be gaveled to order.

But, when Brownback sidles up to me and introduces himself after his remarks, what strikes me most is his calm. Truth be told, it is a little unsettling. There are too many silences, and the silences are too long. They goad you into filling them with small eruptions of chatter. I am, in fact, halfway through a mini-autobiography when Brownback looks down. My Israeli first name has piqued his interest, and he is taking a minute to reflect. Brownback is wearing a tweedy blazer and gray-green khakis. There is no tie around his neck, and his shoes evoke a recent trip to the Timberland outlet store. From a distance, I had mostly noticed his dark hair and trim, athletic build. This makes it all the more jarring to survey the deep grooves in his face.

When Brownback looks up, his hazel eyes have narrowed. He appears to be staring simultaneously at me and 30 feet behind me, if such a thing is possible. "It's a shame that country has always got to defend itself like that," he finally says, so softly I can barely hear him. Judgment Day may be here sooner than you think.

I HAVE COME TO Manhattan, Kansas, to figure out how Sam Brownback took the critical first step from moderate to conservative, and I feel myself getting close when Dixie Roberts walks into a café and extends her hand. Roberts is a petite grandmother with frizzy black hair, stiletto heels, and bright pink lipstick. For years, she has enjoyed unofficial status in this university town as a kind of campus Mama. She put two sons through Kansas State and has amassed enough of her own credits to qualify as a junior. "Political science," she tells me.

Roberts has known Brownback since his 1978 term as student body president, when he told the *Kansas State Collegian* that his goals included a local mass transit system and a legislative network to convey students' concerns directly to state lawmakers. After law school at the University of Kansas, Brownback moved back to Manhattan to work at a small but politically connected firm, a job that eventually led to his appointment as state agricultural secretary. Roberts still gets wistful for the Brownback of this vintage. He was a mainline Protestant in those days, and when Brownback's current worldview comes up in our conversation, she scoffs slightly, then worries she's committed a faux pas: "You don't believe in that stuff, do you?"

When Brownback ran for Congress in 1994, Roberts held a seat in his kitchen cabinet. But, shortly after his primary victory, Roberts walked away and promised herself she wouldn't be back. Now she's offered to drive me to the place where it first dawned on her that Brownback had changed.

Ten minutes later, we've parked in front of the Little Apple Brewery, a local dive with a wood façade and a green awning. Roberts marches me back to an enclosed room toward the rear of the establishment. With the exception of the Southwestern décor, the room is mostly as Roberts remembers it. The Brownback campaign had called a meeting to thank supporters and begin planning for the general election. Brownback himself wasn't in attendance, but his campaign chairman, a former K-State dean named C. Clyde Jones, was there, as were other advisers.

Roberts was already seated when she noticed about a dozen of them enter the room—a group of local anti-abortion activists she'd never seen around the campaign. "It was like an army had come in," she says. "They just took over the meeting." It took all the composure Roberts could muster not to head straight for the door. She sat through the entire event feeling like the wind had been knocked out of her. When she got home, she called C. Clyde to tell him she was out.

To understand what happened, you have to start with Brownback's challenger in the GOP primary, a Manhattan chemical salesman named Bob Bennie. Everything you knew about Bennie told you his campaign would be a joke. He'd never run for office in his life. No one in Manhattan—much less the rest of the district—had ever heard of him. And he had no money to speak of. Just about the only thing Bennie had going for him was the early tremors of a political earthquake.

Up until 1991, Kansans for Life (KFL) had mostly re-

stricted its activism to "citizen lobbying": They would show up in Topeka and buttonhole their representatives. But, despite the group's growing strength, passing legislation proved futile. "The leadership would always make promises, and then nothing happened," recalls Golba, the organization's then-president. That's when Golba realized it would be easier to change the politicians than to change the policies. He hired a savvy former legislator named David Miller to organize his ground troops and placed moderate Republicans in his crosshairs. The plan succeeded beyond all expectations. In 1992, KFL stunned the local political establishment by electing ten conservative representatives. One of the new state reps, a carpet-layer named Jene Vickrey, upset the speaker of the Kansas House.

Brownback's opponent, Bennie, was about as pro-life as you could get without earning yourself a restraining order. He had no trouble winning the KFL endorsement. This, in turn, formed the backbone of his campaign strategy. In every tiny Kansas town Bennie rolled into, dozens of KFL activists would turn up: 25 people in Erie (population 1,200); 50 in Burlington (population 2,700)—all of them to see a no-name with no chance of winning. After Bennie charged through his stump speech, the activists would fan out along the local streets, distributing literature and planting yard signs. It was like having a political operation thousands of workers strong.

From Brownback's perspective, it was also a nightmare. Before the congressional race, Brownback had never really had to justify his abortion views. Now he was getting an earful practically every time he stumped for a vote. There were days when it looked like the whole thing might slip away.

Then, as primary day approached, Bennie noticed a change in his opponent's language. Brownback never used to mention abortion on the campaign trail. Now he was publicly pronouncing himself an abortion opponent. When primary day rolled around in early August, Bennie ran up an impressive 36 percent of the vote to Brownback's 48. But he was still furious, believing Brownback had swiped the nomination by aping his positions. "I knew how I stood," he told me. "I didn't know how he stood."

It was a fair question. Four days before the vote, the local *Manhattan Mercury* had endorsed Brownback as a "moderate" who "displays a solid grasp of complex issues such as health care and foreign trade." The paper's editor-in-chief had known Brownback for years.

THE GINGRICH REVOLUTION swept 73 new Republicans into office in November 1994, and being a freshman felt like standing at the center of the universe. Foreign leaders inquired about addressing the new class. K Street eminences turned up to offer advice.

Ideologically, Brownback was typical of his new colleagues. He strongly opposed abortion and had an abiding faith in God. But, most of all, he felt that big government in Washington was out of control. The idea of reining it in

made him too excited to sleep.

Like any revolutionary junta—or, for that matter, any high school class—the freshmen needed a president. Brownback threw himself into the race. Between December, when the freshmen showed up for orientation, and the day of the vote in February, the field narrowed to two candidates: Brownback and a mild-mannered Mississippian named Roger Wicker. Wicker eked out a narrow victory largely because he didn't appear to be angling for the job. This forced Brownback to fall back on plan B. He'd been part of an informal group called the New Federalists since arriving in Washington. Now he installed himself as their leader.

Under Brownback, the New Federalists became a vanguard of about 25 House members, the purest of the pure. They churned out bills abolishing four Cabinet departments. They demanded huge cuts in congressional staff. They clamored for term limits and tossed around constitutional amendments the way most people edit a grocery list. Whatever it took to strip power from Washington, the New Federalists were prepared to do it.

The Cabinet departments never did get shuttered. Nor did the other items on the New Federalist agenda gain much traction. Instead, Brownback and his colleagues became the House's self-appointed enforcers. When, for example, the Clinton administration balked at the GOP's proposed spending and tax cuts, the New Federalists agitated for a shutdown. After the shutdown proved a p.r. fiasco, and the House leadership caved, Brownback was disappointed but not disillusioned. Then-Florida Representative Joe Scarborough remembers Brownback consoling him on the House floor in early 1996: "Sam came up and put his hand on my shoulder. He said, 'Don't worry, Joe. Even Rome wasn't burnt in a day.'"

That summer, Brownback challenged Sheila Frahm for the Republican nomination for Senate. Frahm was the lieutenant governor of Kansas and the epitome of moderate Republicanism. The state's governor was about to install her in the seat Dole had vacated to run for president when Brownback announced his candidacy. On the airwaves, Brownback attacked Frahm as a shiftless tax-raiser. At the grassroots level, he deployed the boundless energy of the anti-abortion movement. The old divide in Kansas politics had been geographic: the rural hinterlands versus a relatively populous enclave in the northeast. Frahm hailed from a prominent farming family in western Kansas, and—thanks to her years as a legislator in Topeka—she seemed known enough in the northeast to limit Brownback's native-son advantage. "I remember we were in Topeka when the [local] results came in. He had won, but I thought he hadn't won by enough," recalls Trent Ledoux, a former Frahm adviser. But the old geographic model had been obliterated. Brownback ran up huge margins across most of the state and then sailed to victory in the general.

Despite the triumph, Brownback was privately reeling. In August 1995, he'd noticed a small lump on his torso. The tumor was treatable with surgery, but cancer is cancer, and

it has a way of focusing the mind. Brownback was participating in a weekly evangelical prayer group in Washington. But his newfound religiosity didn't calm his nerves; it only agitated them. Brownback couldn't stop wondering what he would have had to show for his life if this hadn't been a false alarm.

When Brownback arrived in the Senate, he sought a meeting with Chuck Colson, the Watergate felon turned born-again Christian. Officially, Colson ran the Prison Fellowship Ministries, an evangelical group that ministered to prisoners. Unofficially, he was the dean of the growing compassionate conservative movement. Brownback told Colson he wanted to put the "positive side" of his Christian faith to work in the Senate. The two men talked at length about how that might happen. Eventually, Colson mentioned William Wilberforce, the devoutly Christian English parliamentarian who had spearheaded the country's anti-slavery movement during the late eighteenth century. Colson encouraged Brownback to adopt Wilberforce as his model of Christian praxis.

Brownback began to read. Religiously. He devoured biographies of Wilberforce. Aides noticed how the boss would carry a copy of C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* everywhere he traveled. He dived into Daniel Patrick Moynihan's writings on politics and culture. People who knew Brownback during this time talk of metaphysical change. "I've had a sense that his faith has gotten stronger every year he's been in Congress," says former Democratic Representative Tony Hall, who regularly prayed with Brownback. Colson describes it as a "spiritual maturing."

The coup de grâce came later that year. At the time, Brownback was serving as chairman of the subcommittee that oversees Washington, D.C. David Kensinger, Brownback's longtime campaign manager and political Svengali, remembers when he and the senator noticed that the number of abortions in the District consistently rivaled the number of live births and that the vast majority of these mothers were unmarried. A little algebra revealed that only one in every six pregnancies ended with a married woman bringing a child to term. It was a jaw-dropping statistic. "You can do the flat tax, you can do school choice," says Kensinger. "But until you fix that, you're not going to fix what's wrong with D.C."

Brownback was done being a Gingrich Revolutionary. He sat down with Paul Ryan, his then-chief of staff, and told him as much. "It's one thing to introduce legislation to cut taxes, like 50 other members of the Senate. It's another thing to make a material difference in this country, or in Africa," says Ryan. "No one else was doing this, fighting the culture war. ... That's the calculation he made."

TOPEKA BIBLE CHURCH (TBC) occupies a multi-level, gray stone building in a racially mixed neighborhood of urban Topeka. Around the corner is a pair of apartment complexes that screams service-economy transience. A couple blocks away, a sign

advertises DISCOUNT SMOKES AND CONVENIENCE STORE.

When I ask Jim Congdon, the church's pastor, why TBC never relocated to the exurbs, he seems wearied by the question. Congdon is a trim, bearded man in his fifties, with cheeks you could store acorns in. He tells me he has considered moving out to the western edge of town, where much of his congregation now lives. But, each time, the tug of the old neighborhood wins out. "I just feel like it's good for us to stay here. I think that helps our congregation be more diverse," he says. Tomorrow, Congdon and 50 TBC volunteers will spend the day painting and mulching a nearby elementary school.

Sitting in Congdon's cluttered office, listening to his reflections on race and urban blight, you want to tell your secular friends that this whole culture-war thing is a huge misunderstanding. We can all go home now. But there is a sharper edge to Congdon's evangelicalism, and it can creep up on you in an instant.

Congdon's Sunday sermon, for example, is a meditation on the proper mindset for a Christian when Christ descends from heaven. This turns out to be highly relevant, because the current turbulence in the Middle East signifies that the end times are near. "For the first time in 40 years, an Israeli prime minister is worried about being annihilated," Congdon observes. One of the bigger divides among

evangelicals is between pre- and post-millennialists. The post-millennialists believe Christ will only return after peace reigns on Earth. The pre-millennialists believe the apocalypse will usher in the messiah's return. Congdon, it turns out, is a pre-millennialist with an itchy trigger finger.

Once the service ends, I spot Brownback chatting up a woman manning a voter registration booth in the lobby. He's wearing a blue knit sweater and looking better rested than he did in Iowa. He invites me to join him at a reception for the outgoing youth pastor, and we make friendly banter while his two adopted children crawl all over him. From time to time I lose sight of eight-year-old Mark, only to see a small pair of legs emerge from between Brownback's arm and waist, at which point the senator gets to work retying a pair of white "Shaq" high-tops. (There are five Brownback children in all.)

After about ten minutes, a tallish woman in a sherbet-green outfit buttonholes Brownback, husband in tow. The woman gushes about how she prays for him every day and how lucky Kansans are to have a senator like him. She is the kind of excitable busybody you expect to find in every congregation, a big vacuum cleaner of opinions who repackages them as her own. Now she's off on a rant about how the press opposes President Bush because he's a Republican and a Christian. Before long, she's talking about Iraq, then

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the first Gulf war, then on to a lament about the attention span of our "microwave society." Finally it's back to the liberal media. "Well," Brownback says consolingly, "they have the newspapers and TV, but we have radio." The woman is, if not exactly appeased, at least out of material. "That's all I listen to is radio," she says.

As she's leaving, Brownback turns to me and explains his theory of red-state/blue-state relations. People who live in Red America know plenty about Blue America. They often work in large cities, or they travel to them on vacation, or they hear about them through popular culture. But the opposite is almost never true. "If they"—the people in Blue America—"travel at all," Brownback says, "they go abroad, like to Europe or Tokyo." I can't say for sure, but I think he is paying me a compliment.

IN 2001, BROWNBACK led a Senate delegation to the Vatican to award the Pope a Congressional Gold Medal. The group was bipartisan—in addition to Brownback, Catholic Republicans like Rick Santorum and Bob Smith of New Hampshire came along, as did Barbara Mikulski, a Maryland Democrat. The highlight of the trip was the Pope's private receiving line. Brownback would introduce each senator to John Paul II, and the three would chat privately for a few minutes. When it was Smith's turn, Brownback turned to the Pope and said, "This is Senator Bob Smith of New Hampshire. He's the leading pro-life advocate in the U.S. Senate." Smith then returned the favor. "The man sitting next to you has done more than his fair share," he said. Brownback was beaming.

Brownback's conversion the following year made him both a Catholic and a member of the rarefied flock of John McCloskey, priest to Washington's conservative establishment. McCloskey had previously converted conservative journalists Bob Novak and Larry Kudlow, and Brownback's "sponsor" was his fellow senator, Santorum. As with most secret societies, the accounts of Brownback's admission to this circle are remarkably thin. No one describes it as much more than a "quiet ceremony" officiated by McCloskey in a K Street chapel.

Even those closest to Brownback remain in the dark on the matter. When I asked Kensinger the reason his longtime boss converted, he told me simply, "I don't know." Will Gunn, a retired Air Force colonel who had met Brownback in the early '90s, was even more mystified. On Memorial Day weekend in 2002, Gunn had traveled to Brownback's home in Topeka for a reunion of their White House Fellows class. It turned out to be an extremely intimate gathering. All of the fellows had gone on to jobs with unrelenting schedules, and so, of the twelve alumni, only three could make the trip. Gunn arrived to find the senator and his wife, Mary, disarmingly down to earth. For dinner, the guests caught fish out of a backyard pond, which Brownback dutifully cleaned. By day, the families played pickup basketball; by night, they went dancing at a local honky-tonk club. On Sunday morning, Gunn, who is also an evangelical Christ-

ian, attended church with the Brownbacks.

Gunn and Brownback have been close ever since. They get together every two or three months to have dinner and talk about their obligations as fathers and believers and the role of Jesus Christ in their lives. Brownback once told Gunn he's in Washington because he believes the Lord wants him to be there. And yet, amazingly, Gunn says he didn't know about Brownback's conversion until he read about it in the newspaper several years later.

What we do know is that Brownback had taken a passing interest in Catholicism as early as 1997, when he teamed up with Ted Kennedy to arrange a Congressional Gold Medal for Mother Teresa. In the process, he'd begun reading up on Catholic teaching, including the writings of John Paul II. Brownback is what you might call a God geek. He is endlessly fascinated by all things religious. "If it's a spiritual thing, he loves it," says Congdon, Brownback's pastor at TBC, where he still attends service after Mass most Sundays. Not surprisingly, Brownback's crash course on Catholicism seemed to stick with him. "It started working in the background," Kensinger speculates. "If these people are who they are, and I want to have a soul more like theirs, what helped them to become more like they are?"

Things proceeded in this vein for years. Paul Ryan, now a representative from Wisconsin, served as Brownback's chief of staff through his early days in the Senate. Long after he left the job, Ryan, who is Catholic, would periodically get calls from his former boss. The two men would talk about Catholic doctrine and the intellectual foundations of Catholicism. Over time, these musings began to fill out the gaps in Brownback's religious worldview. "I just think he found an articulation of the Christian faith in the Catholic tradition that he felt was more fully developed," says Brownback's friend Deal Hudson, a fellow convert and former Catholic outreach adviser to the Bush White House.

There are less flattering explanations as well. Brownback had always had a weakness for elite societies. He applied twice to be a White House Fellow before being admitted. When he got to Congress, *Rolling Stone* has reported, he sought admission to a small "cell" overseen by "The Fellowship," an organization of evangelical elites. Catholicism in general, and McCloskey's flock in particular, may have been just another upscale fraternity to pledge.

Nor is it easy to ignore how Brownback's conversion has given him a beachhead in each of the two most powerful communities on the religious right. Even Congdon concedes there was some skepticism in the pews of TBC when news of the conversion made the rounds. "I fielded a lot of questions from suspicious people who thought that was just a political conversion," he says.

A generation ago, being Catholic would have been a clear liability in certain evangelical quarters. But, over the last 20 years, conservative Catholic and evangelical groups have forged a semi-official alliance, evocatively dubbed "co-belligerency," to help advance their shared political agenda. Kensinger says Team Brownback has no idea how

the senator's conversion will play among evangelicals, but there's clearly a hope that it will net him the best of both worlds—a candidate who can address each group in its own language.

Political or not, Brownback's path to Catholicism appears to have motivated his broadening interest in human rights. In the years since September 11, Brownback has taken on more or less the entire Republican Party in a fight to protect the rights of political refugees, not exactly a popular crusade in the middle of the war on terrorism. In recent years, Brownback has even begun a very public reconsideration of his support for the death penalty. At a hearing earlier this year, Brownback solicited testimony from families of victims on both sides of the issue. Afterward, a *Kansas City Star* reporter asked which stance he found more compelling. Brownback wouldn't say, but he noted how the death penalty supporters looked angry and "hard." "In Christian theology, the burden is on the person who has not forgiven," he said.

Then there is the immigration issue, which is either a colossal political miscalculation or the policy equivalent of Catholic self-flagellation. In 2005, Brownback signed on as a co-sponsor to the relatively moderate Kennedy-McCain bill. The reaction from rank-and-file Republicans has not been kind. Steve Scheffler, the head of a conservative evangelical group in Iowa, told me, "The biggest thing [Brownback would] have to address is why did he vote for that horrendous bill?" Kensing says Brownback's answer is simple: "The Bible says you will be judged by how you treat the widow, the orphan, the foreign among you. That's the end of it." He believes the key is how Brownback manages his position—not the position itself. But Chuck Hurley, a Brownback law school classmate who runs the influential Iowa Family Policy Center, has hinted a shift could be in the works. "I understand he's been doing some consulting about that issue," Hurley told me conspiratorially, citing an upcoming meeting with a local anti-immigration politician.

SO JUST WHO, exactly, is Sam Brownback? Answering that question is difficult, but it helps to go back to the beginning of his political career and to a woman named Kim Smith. A longtime conservative activist, Smith is the kind of person whose name inspires shifty eyes and labored euphemisms in a small town like Manhattan, Kansas. When I mentioned her to Dixie Roberts, she hemmed and hawed, then told me that Smith's sons "had always been in trouble" and that she found Smith's constant preaching a little tough to take. "Here you are, espousing all these religious views, and someone has a troubled personal life," she sighed, before hastening to add, "we've always been friends."

Smith had been one of Bob Bennie's most loyal supporters during the 1994 GOP primary. She shared his "out there" views on abortion and had derided Brownback as an operator. "Sam, like so many others, was just a 'good ole guy' and abortion was a nasty subject you didn't talk

about," Smith recently wrote me. Smith seemed to derive a sadistic pleasure from making Brownback sweat. One of her sons worked at a Christian radio station and would receive updates on his public appearances. Smith made a point of dispatching activists to these events to hector him about abortion.

But, by the end of the primary, Brownback had started to generate favorable chatter in Smith's circles. She decided to meet him in person. Smith watched the way Brownback treated his family. She grilled his longtime scheduler about what he was like to work for. And, most important of all, she opened a long, anguished dialogue with him on abortion. Smith told Brownback how, back in the mid-'70s, she had terminated a six-week-old pregnancy. She was 19 and didn't have a high school diploma or marketable skills. She showed up at a Planned Parenthood clinic with dozens of questions, only to be given what she says was a "high-pressure sales job," to which she acceded. "It was the most devastating decision I have ever made," she wrote me.

Brownback was shocked to hear that abortion was so prevalent, that a 14-year-old girl could have an abortion without her parents knowing, and that the procedure was legal up to the minute of birth (which is not, in fact, true). He had never even heard of a technique called partial-birth abortion. After a few weeks of this, Smith got in touch with Golba and the other leaders of the local pro-life movement. She told them that Brownback had become an ally in their cause. She felt so strongly about this, she said, that she was ready to vouch for him personally.

By the time Brownback and Golba met again, it was obvious that he had changed. Brownback had been a mild-mannered Methodist at the outset of the campaign. Now, as a result of his conversations with Smith and Robert Tyson (Brownback's former Sunday school teacher), he had begun to opine on the abortion issue with a religious sense of purpose. "His talk was completely different," says Golba. "We felt an honesty. ... I could tell he knew the issue; he had studied it. We felt that's where his heart was."

A few years later, Brownback's old primary opponent, Bob Bennie, received an invitation to a breakfast in Omaha, Nebraska, featuring a local gubernatorial candidate. A Christian men's organization had sponsored the event, and Bennie—who had since relocated to nearby Lincoln—was just "filling a seat at a table." Then he realized he knew the keynote speaker: Sam Brownback. Brownback's remarks were unusually personal—really more of a testimonial than a speech. He talked largely about the spiritual change he'd undergone during his first congressional campaign. Bennie had been livid over what he'd seen as Brownback's insincere positioning on abortion. But at the breakfast, he told me, it was obvious that "he'd had a change of heart in the way he thought about things." When Brownback finished, Bennie stood off to the side as the other men filed by. Finally the senator turned and recognized him. "Bob," he said, holding out his hand. But Bennie wasn't in a handshaking mood. He walked up to Brownback and the two men embraced. ■

BOOKS & THE ARTS

STANLEY KAUFFMANN ON FILMS Histories, Fresh and Final

THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON said that the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton. But that is not all that happened at Eton, or at many other English public schools (the equivalent of American private schools). From time to time the English school, its teachers, and its students have been the subjects of plays and (latterly) films that explored more than its benefits. By now the school film has become a quasi-charade that implies both why Waterloo was won and why some subsequent battles, literal and otherwise, would not have pleased the duke.

American films on the same or similar subjects don't have the English implications. *Dead Poets Society* was an occasion, not a symptom. English schools, on film at least, are taken as symptoms and predictions in a national way, pro or con. Terence Rattigan's *The Browning Version*, David Sherwin's *If...*—even James Hilton's good old *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* in its two versions—were being English about the English for the world to see.

Now Alan Bennett's **THE HISTORY BOYS** joins the line. Bennett's screenplay is adapted from his play by the same title, which was successful in London and New York, and now it is filmed with its theater cast. In charge was the original director, Nicholas Hytner, who has had much film experience. (*The Madness of King George* functioned juicily as film; *The Crucible* did not.) Here Hytner spills occasionally into an overheated idea of intimacy, sometimes seeming to shove us up people's nostrils. But mostly he moves and composes with clear memory of the many good films that he has seen.

In 1983, eight boys in their late teens, graduating from a middling Yorkshire

school, have been selected to apply to Oxford and Cambridge and must take an entrance exam, which thrills the headmaster to bits and affects the eight students in more or less the same way. One, a working-class Welsh boy, is not a serious student and doesn't give much of a hoot about going to university (which makes us wonder how he got into the group). All the rest are keen on Oxbridge. In a typical modern mélange, the group contains a Jew and a Muslim, yet all except the

Welshman speak with the airy briskness of their elders.

Early in the film, the tone implies that Bennett's purpose is specifically anti-Wellington. He seems to be showing that the "pukka sahib," stiff-upper-lip national English character, as predicted in an English schoolboy, is now not only dented but derided. That character never becomes glorified, as in some past school films, but most of the decisions, plus the quality of discourse—the very way that teachers treat students as equals in verbal ping-pong—imply there is still considerable style to be preserved merely in being English.

The story as such doesn't amount to much: the students and staff all just prepare, more or less assiduously, for the entrance exam. The body of the film is its small incidents and its curvy dialogue. That dialogue is stuffed, by staff and students, with quotations of poetry and prose—"gobbets," they are called. Non-classic culture is plentifully present, too. Two of the boys, in one madcap frenzy, play the last scene of *Brief Encounter*. After a death, a group sings softly, sweetly, "Bye Bye Blackbird."

Chief among the film's incidents are two homosexual items—potentially homosexual, anyway. The subject has long hovered around English schools, and

here it is open. One of the homosexually involved teachers is played by Richard Griffiths, who has the most grotesquely obese figure I can remember in an actor. When he is asked if he has told his wife about his same-sex leanings, he says that she wouldn't be much interested.

The role is a piece of cake for Griffiths, as it would be for any competent actor, even a thin one. At the other extreme is Clive Merrison, who plays the headmaster like stale cake, iced with mugging. (The fault is as much Hytner's as Merrison's.) All the others are at home in the way that even young English actors, along with veterans, can seem to be on their native articulate heath. Dominic Cooper shines as the best-looking of the boys, who makes the most trouble. The Jewish boy is played by Samuel Barnett with unashamed delicacy. Steven Campbell Moore as the newest teacher handles a lot of suppressed thoughts adroitly; and it is lovely indeed to see a veteran teacher played by Frances de la Tour, who was a perfect Helena in Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1971.

At the last, despite the modern touches in Bennett's screenplay, *The History Boys* fills the traditional bill. Wellington would probably not be too upset by it. Eventually it tells us that Waterloo is still in pretty good hands.

If the word "pleased" can be used about an obituary, I was pleased a few weeks ago to see the brief note about Philippe Noiret's death on the front page of *The New York Times*. (The full story was inside.) How many foreign actors who never were stars or notable public figures have ever been so treated in an American newspaper? How many readers would even recognize Noiret's name? I could only deduce that the newspaper staff includes some whose appreciation of acting exceeds their newspaper sense.

Noiret, who died on November 23 at age seventy-six, was a man of contradictorily burning but restrained gifts. In his more than 150 films, including those for television, he played a breathtakingly wide range of roles—a regency duke in *Let Joy Reign Supreme*, an 1890s reactionary in *The Judge and the Assas-*

sin, a saddened World War I army officer in *Life and Nothing But*. He was as unhandsome as an actor can be without making much of it. The American actor who looked a bit like him was Walter Matthau, but Matthau, taking as he was, had nothing like Noiret's scope and depth. It is something more than reverse provincialism to note wryly that when Noiret died—this man who was nothing more or less than a fine actor—the president of France issued a public statement mourning the loss. Comparisons with the White House would be wasteful.

Noiret's death is one more reminder of a curious power of film—imaginary

intimacy. When the comparable Japanese actor Takashi Shimura died, some years ago, I felt, among other responses, that I had lost a friend. So with Noiret. The instant I read the notice I felt a foolishly personal pang. But of course the actor took over. I remembered his face at a particular moment. In Bertrand Tavernier's *The Clockmaker*, Noiret plays a tradesman who lives a quiet life with his grown son. One morning a police inspector quietly and carefully tells him that the police are looking for his son because the youth has killed a man. Noiret's face, after he hears this news, will always be with me. ■

JED PERL ON ART

A Milder Romanticism

A STRONG NORTHERN LIGHT, clarifying without being overwhelming, suffuses "Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity," the magnificent exhibition at the Milwaukee Art Museum. This panorama of the arts in Austria, Germany, and Denmark in the first third of the nineteenth century brings together furniture, decorative arts, and paintings in order to tell a challenging story. Moving through the galleries in Milwaukee, visitors can almost feel the heat as the temperate classicism of the late eighteenth century is warmed by the Romantic individualism of the early nineteenth century. The result is a subtle but powerful shift in the language of form, a convergence of disparate philosophical and psychological inclinations that inspires the voluptuous asceticism of Biedermeier furniture, with its exquisitely crafted surfaces and its dynamic silhouettes. Wherever you turn in this deftly shaped exhibition, you find the Biedermeier artists' back-to-basics empiricism energized by a sense of fantasy, so that anything from the fan-shaped design of a side chair to the asymmetrical composition of a landscape painting to the delicate drawing of a butterfly on a glass goblet has its own quirky glow.

**BIEDERMEIER:
THE INVENTION
OF SIMPLICITY**
(Milwaukee
Art Museum)

Milwaukee is the only American venue for this genuinely important show, which travels to Vienna and Berlin next year. And if admirers of Biedermeier furniture have reason to regret that the first American exhibition devoted to the arts of the period will not be seen in other American cities, it is nevertheless clear that Milwaukee is a perfect place for this event. The city, which was shaped by several generations of German immigration, has a continuing interest in German culture, so that the glories of Biedermeier art and design are a natural fit for its museum, with its outstanding holdings in twentieth-century German Expressionist painting and its world-class collection of seventeenth-century German clocks, examples of the Baroque goldsmith's art at its most deliciously intricate and grandiose.

It is easy to see why the citizens of Milwaukee, a city whose downtown contains a fascinating group of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century buildings, would respond to the powerfully architectural thinking that characterizes Biedermeier furniture. And as it happens, the Biedermeier show is housed in the latest addition to Milwaukee's architectural trove, a recent building by Santiago Calatrava that adds temporary exhibition space to a museum that al-

ready boasted an engaging 1950s building by Eero Saarinen and a handsome 1970s addition in a modernist poured-concrete style. The three structures, set on the shore of Lake Michigan, make a fine assemblage. On the day I visited, they were full of museumgoers who were studying not only the Biedermeier exhibition but also a permanent collection that contains some first-rate twentieth-century paintings and a magnificent Roman torso.

LAURIE WINTERS, THE CURATOR of earlier European art in Milwaukee, has brought bold thought and good sense to this complicated project. She sharpens our understanding without oversimplifying the crosscurrents of early nineteenth-century taste. The term "Biedermeier" was derived from the name of a fictional character in a mid-nineteenth-century satirical weekly, a schoolteacher and poet in a village in Swabia: a caricature of middle-class mediocrity. By the late nineteenth century, "Biedermeier" had become shorthand for the culture of the early nineteenth century (*bieder* means something like "honest but commonplace"). And eventually Biedermeier came to suggest a northern European equivalent of Victoriana—in other words, a style that was cozy and stolid and slightly fussy in spirit, essentially bourgeois.

What this view of Biedermeier failed to recognize was the early experimental phase of the movement, when a relatively small group of gifted craftsmen were re-imagining Neoclassical forms, often working for aristocratic and royal clients with extremely adventuresome taste. Winters and her colleagues—Hans Ottomeyer and Albrecht Pyritz at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin and Klaus Albrecht Schröder and Maria Luise Sternath-Schuppanz at the Albertina in Vienna—have sharpened our understanding of the period by shifting the emphasis from the second quarter of the nineteenth century back to the first quarter. In doing so, they have reasserted the avant-garde dimension in Biedermeier. They also suggest how Biedermeier's radical reconsideration of the forms of traditional furnishings and decorative arts led the way to the Arts and Crafts Movement, to the Wiener Werkstätte (Josef Hoffmann and Koloman Moser both admired Biedermeier), to the Bauhaus, and to mid-century Scandinavian design.

The show's boldface subtitle, "The Invention of Simplicity," is obviously hyperbolic. Simplicity, far from having been invented in any particular period, is an essential human yearning that reasserts itself in different ways at different points in human history. Simplicity was no more invented in the early nineteenth century than it was invented by the architects of the Parthenon in ancient Greece, or by Brunelleschi when he designed the Pazzi Chapel in fifteenth-century Florence, or by Mondrian when he developed his Neoplastic style. The art and the design of the Biedermeier period marks, rather, an epoch in the evolution of simplicity, characterized as it is by a process of intensification or clarification, by a paring down and re-focusing of forms in such a way as to give them a uniqueness, a personal truth.

By de-emphasizing the old idea of Biedermeier as a style associated with the mild domesticity of the middle class, Winters and her colleagues are able to bring all sorts of fresh associations and linkages into play. We begin to have some inkling of what might be said to be the philosophical underpinnings of the Biedermeier style. These idiosyncratic but powerful creations suggest an idea of the work of art (or of decorative art) as a highly personal expression of the search for universal form. There is something almost Kantian about the greatest pieces of Biedermeier furniture.

AS FOR THE BIEDERMEIER artists and craftsmen, they were Romantic empiricists. They brought a rapt, ardent attentiveness to natural phenomena: the fall of light through a window, the beauty of an evening sky, the grain of a piece of wood, the wings of a butterfly, the multicolored surface of a geological specimen. If furniture rather than painting is the essential expression of this cultural moment, it is surely because the period's yearning for a spiritualized concreteness found a particularly fertile ground in the unabashed physicality of furniture. There is something highly original in the intentness with which these craftsmen showcase unbroken expanses of wood, allowing the grain of the wood, with its mesmerizing whorls and waves, to become the only ornamental flourish.

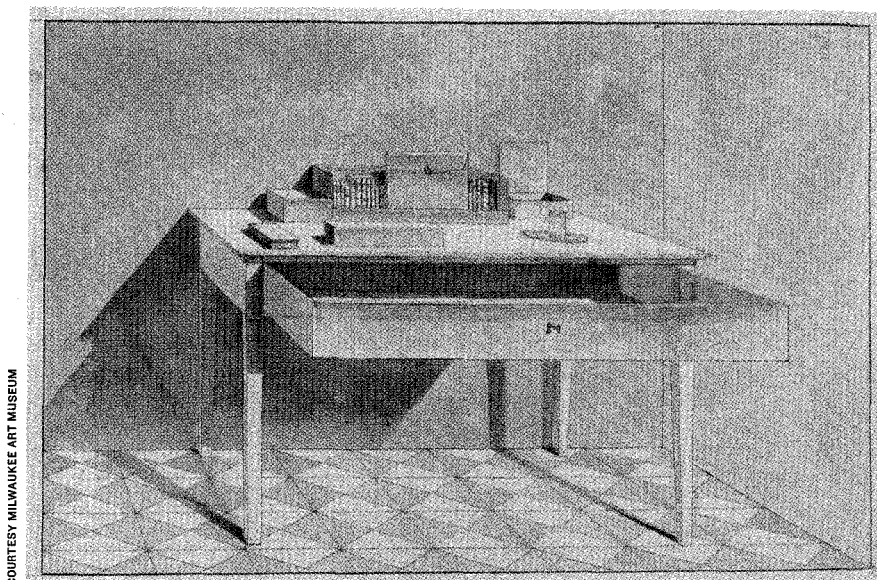
It was as if the woodworkers were asking their clients to penetrate to the essence of things (though this "essence" was often a veneer). A chest of drawers,

produced in Munich around 1810, is little more than a great horizontal expanse of cherry veneer, a boldly planar composition with the vertical rhythms of the cherry grain unifying the entire surface, as the fronts of the drawers have all been cut out of matched pieces of veneer. Here, and with many other pieces in the show, I felt as if the craftsmen were nature poets. The beauty of the workmanship only underlines what is already there. What you are seeing is a fascination with the purity of materials that will echo all through the modern movement.

Even the most fanciful flights of the Biedermeier craftsmen have a back-to-basics logic. Perhaps the most essential

for chair backs, produced by the Danish artist Christian Knudsen in 1826, suggest not a ceaseless piling up of possibilities so much as a ceaseless paring down of possibilities: a search for the true shape. This ardent experimentation, this seemingly endless dance of themes and variations, brings to mind the constant re-adjustments of vegetal forms in Matisse's paper cutouts. And the result, not entirely dissimilar, is a Platonic playfulness, a larkish adventure through the wildest possibilities of the chair back, in search of what might be thought of as the essence of a chair back.

The Biedermeier craftsmen brought the same enchanting experimental spirit



Drawing for a Simple Table, Vienna, circa 1815

item of Biedermeier furniture was the lightweight side chair—a chair that was easily movable, that did not necessarily have a fixed position in a room, and thus became the emblem of a new social informality and mobility in early nineteenth-century Europe. It was in finding ways to give some element of surprise to this most fundamental form that the Biedermeier furniture-makers often demonstrated their nearly limitless imaginative bravura. The backs of these chairs, which began by alluding to the curved back support of ancient Greek seats, went through a dazzling series of adjustments and adumbrations in the early decades of the nineteenth century, generating a range of fan-shapes and lyre-shapes and tear-shapes and ovals and triangles and half-moons and starbursts. A group of pen-and-ink studies

to tables and sofas. A table base might be composed of a forest of columns, or of a couple of grandly curved planes, while a sofa could be a pile of cushions on a snake-shaped wooden base. It was not a matter of form following function so much as a search for the form that would express the ideal of a function. The imaginative wit of the Biedermeier chair or sofa, the very unusualness of its design, had a declarative power, as if the point were to announce that this was indeed what a chair or a sofa really ought to be.

A magnificent Viennese table from 1826 in mahogany and pear veneer, originally designed as part of the furnishings for the music room of Archduchess Sophie at Laxenburg Palace, is a new acquisition by the Milwaukee Art Museum. This powerful image, with its

quatrefoil base, columnar support, and oval top, has an architectonic power, as can be seen in a beautiful nineteenth-century watercolor of the music room, where the complete suite of mahogany furniture, including a piano, is set off in all its dark glory against a dazzle of blue-and-white wallpaper.

In *An Illustrated History of Furnishing*, the Italian writer and scholar Mario Praz—whose books are overlooked in the Milwaukee catalogue, although his work of the 1950s and 1960s did much to bring Biedermeier art and culture out of the shadows—reproduces this remarkable watercolor of Archduchess Sophie's music room. He describes the interior as "an abstract room, if ever there was one, in a period that was so fanatically figurative." And then, thinking of the room's function, he goes on to observe that "the pattern of the wallpaper seems almost to suggest or to accompany columns of sound."

IN DESCRIBING THIS AS "AN ABSTRACT ROOM," Praz touches on something that is key to the Biedermeier spirit, something that the curators of this exhibition are pointing to when they speak of "the invention of simplicity." On the most literal level, of course, Praz is remarking that this is a room without pictures on the walls, with none of the portraits or landscapes or sculpted busts that so often filled Biedermeier interiors. But there is, I think, a deeper idea at work here, for the absence of decoration on Biedermeier furniture, the absence of the varieties of vegetal and figural forms that are so common on rococo and Neoclassical furniture, announces a newly abstract spirit in furniture itself. The more the Biedermeier craftsmen diverged from the Neoclassicists' evocations of Roman and Greek and Egyptian forms, the more their own creations, those grandly curved and angled sofas and tables and chairs, came to exist in a time-out-of-time, a realm bereft of historical allusion. It is in this sense that Biedermeier may be said to stand at the dawn of modernity. In many of the Biedermeier designs for silver and porcelain, the shapes are so straightforward, at once so sophisticated and so primal, that we find ourselves confronting the abstraction of a function, as if the craftsmen were asking, "What is the essence of a cup or a candlestick?"

If the forthrightness of Biedermeier is not always recognized, this is because

it is so often mixed with an element of fantasy, but then one of the great charms of the decorative arts in the Biedermeier period is that they can suggest a fantasy of forthrightness. In the audacious simplicity of a chest of drawers or the brazenly undecorated form of a silver object, the forthrightness is unabashed. But in other instances—in the glass or ceramic objects that are made to mimic the look of stone or wood, or in the clear crystal beaker painted with a goldfish or a butterfly—you may feel that the artisans are delightfully teasing their own yearning for forthrightness. In all these works, however, whether the woodworker is beautifully polishing the cherry veneer or the glassblower is mimicking the look of agate, there is a frankness about the interest in nature that is worlds away from the pastoral poetry of eighteenth-century French furnishings and decorative arts, where the power of nature is always wreathed in decorative quotation marks. When the rococo craftsmen imitated wood or stone, they wanted to subdue the vegetal and mineral realms. As for the Biedermeier craftsmen who imitated wood or stone, they always aimed to salute the full-out power of the natural world.

IN MILWAUKEE, LAURIE WINTERS has beautifully layered the museumgoing experience, so that we take in furnishings and wall coverings and silver and china and paintings and drawings not in isolation but in overlapping waves. The paintings in the show help to flesh out the story, even when, as is the case with many of the landscapes, they are anything but masterpieces. The realism of Eduard Gurk and Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller is saccharine and finicky; these artists are so intent on the details of the natural world that they entirely lose track of the poetry. Eduard Gaertner's rooftop view of Berlin is another matter entirely, an invitingly clear-eyed yet unconventional panorama that ranges from the appealing image of a workman sitting at his ease on the roof of the Friedrichswerder Church to the teeming figures moving through the spic-and-span expanse of the Friedrichsforum. And Georg Friedrich Kersting's paintings of women in interiors offer distant echoes of Vermeer's subtly audacious *Woman Embroidering* (1817), the painter Louise Seidler, seated near a window, her back

to us, becomes a form as elemental as the form of the chair on which she sits, of the sofa nearby, of the guitar on the sofa.

Especially welcome is the opportunity to see a number of paintings by Christen Købke, including one of his largest, *The Roof of Frederiksborg Castle, with a View of the Lake, Village, and Forest* (1834–1835). Købke, little known outside Denmark, has attracted a great deal of interest in recent years, as has his teacher, Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, who was the subject of a retrospective at the National Gallery in 2003. While the soft-toned intensities of Eckersberg's portraits have a certain power, it is surely Købke's work that most satisfyingly defines the Biedermeier interest in the individual as an investigator of essences. The fresh perspectives that characterize Købke's landscapes, with their asymmetrical compositions and startling joinings of background and foreground, are as much emblems of an unconventional ideal as the curiously shaped backs of those Biedermeier chairs. The large *Frederiksborg Castle* landscape, at once so insistently austere and so cunningly complex in its unification of the castle in the foreground and the landscape beyond, brings to mind the daring structures of Hiroshige's block prints or the abstracted Southern California vistas of Diebenkorn's Ocean Park series. There is an architectonic wit about Købke's work, and although his strikingly carpentered compositions never achieve the lyric finality of Corot's early Roman cityscapes or his *Bridge at Mantes* and *Belfry, Douai*, Købke remains one of the immortal eccentrics of early nineteenth-century European art, the master of a strangely dispassionate Romanticism. In his wonderful book on Købke, which appeared in 1992, Sanford Schwartz sees in the painter's work a paradoxical mingling of emotions that might be said to define the period as a

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whole: the confluence of "Spartan leanness" with a "Romantic ache," the intensity that is at once "colloquial and personal," the "feelings for the beauty of the natural world and for the note of uncertainty beneath it."

THE MILWAUKEE EXHIBITION, like many important surveys dedicated to the decorative arts, reflects not only shifting interests in the scholarly world but also broader transformations in taste and sensibility. Biedermeier furniture, underpriced forty years ago, has in recent decades been embraced by dealers and collectors. In turn, it has become the darling of the shelter magazines, where it is regularly praised for its "versatility," meaning that it looks good when juxtaposed with modernist masterworks in SoHo lofts. Museums (including the Louvre, which never acquired Biedermeier decorative arts) are scrambling to beef up their collections, and a landscape by Købke was recently acquired by the National Gallery in London.

The revival of interest in a historical style sometimes signals a subtle shift in the contemporary worldview, and there can be little doubt that the measured romanticism of the Biedermeier world provokes a sympathetic response just now. The homeboundness of Biedermeier romanticism, the inwardness of its eccentricities, is something that we can understand at a time when the feverishness of Art Nouveau and the extremism of Russian Constructivism look as alien as the psychedelic pleasures and radical extravagances of the 1960s and 1970s that once helped to bring Art Nouveau and Russian Constructivism back into view. It may also be that the end of the Cold War and the attendant upsurge in interest in Germany and Central Europe has fueled an awareness of Biedermeier culture. For younger travelers, Biedermeier Germany could have some of the fascination that early Renaissance Tuscany had for their parents and grandparents—a vacation destination that doubles as a historical fantasy.

There is a beginning-again quality about the Biedermeier world, where Enlightenment hopes were ripening and cooling, turning at once more lucid and more subdued. Goethe, whose color theories are part of the prehistory of modern art, makes an appearance in the Milwaukee show, which features part of his

Here, There

Everywhere a special kind of maiming is going on in a recognizable dark. It's a monster, but average and bored. It carries a flail and plays a threshing game. It cuts us darker till we're spare and part. Tongue. Torso. It shaves us, wears us, thin. It hones us to a pin, a single inward point. It makes a bone spur out of us and out of joint. Our knot is drawn into a stranglehold. What we know is pinched and tight. And day is just a hard stone to whittle a self away on until it cracks and sinks. You think you're cold? Touch it. It's in the closet and under the bed and in the alleyway and in your head.

CATHERINE WING

collection of wallpaper samples, papers packed with the dazzling patterns that are yet another aspect of the Biedermeier search for intensities of experience. And Alexander von Humboldt, the great naturalist, is remembered in Milwaukee with a beautifully modest kitchen chair designed for his family by the architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel, as well as by minerals from his collections, one of which is displayed right next to a Viennese cup and saucer decorated in an amethyst pattern.

By weaving figures such as Goethe and Humboldt into her story, Winters suggests that their spirited curiosity offers a key to the period. Surely there is an improvisatory warmth about Goethe's and Humboldt's scientific interests that can be especially appealing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when scientific and technological research has so often been overtaken by a corporate scale and impersonality. Humboldt is the protagonist of *Measuring the World*, a new novel by the young Austrian writer Daniel Kehlmann, which was a best-seller in Germany and has just been published here by Pantheon. Kehlmann's novel juxtaposes the lives of Humboldt and the mathematician Carl Friedrich Gauss, and its charm lies in the elegance with which their scientific and mathematical triumphs are interwoven with their human foibles. This ingeniously crafted book is about the everydayness of intellectual heroism.

While the Milwaukee show only hints at the philosophical implications of the

Biedermeier style, Laurie Winters brings a breadth and an ease to the exhibition that allows us to extend its implications in any number of ways. This is an exemplary survey—focused and expansive, lucid and suggestive. That such a major exhibition has been mounted in Milwaukee is a triumph, a sign that smaller museums can in fact make major contributions, if curators and administrators have the guts, and if they have the support of the community. Most American museums have become afraid of attempting anything but the most obvious shows, which are invariably the crowd-pleasers focused on Monet or Picasso or Warhol. Talk to curators and they will tell you that idea after idea is shot down by the administrators and the trustees, because they fear

that the projects will not prove cost-efficient. Yet in Milwaukee, a smart and spirited curator—with the support of the museum's director, David Gordon—has been able to team up with curators in Austria and Germany to produce an epochal show.

BY TAPPING INTO THE LOCAL fascination with German culture, Gordon and Winters have pulled off something very big. (And the show will leave a permanent stamp on the Milwaukee museum, because local benefactors have banded together to purchase a few key pieces of Biedermeier furniture for its permanent collection.) "Biedermeier: The Invention of Simplicity" is accompanied by all the tools of the modern museum—the p.r. firm, the blanket advertising, the café and gift shop tie-ins—but for once the marketing strategies are advancing the cause of art. Curators, administrators, and trustees across the country should take note of what is happening in Milwaukee. The city has produced a blockbuster with brains—a blockbuster that honors the audience. When you enter the galleries, you are engaging with art and culture at the highest level. And people know it.

Laurie Winters has created a glorious visual pageant that is also intellectually tough-minded. The qualities of intensity and particularity that you discover in this show, whether the emphasis on wood grain in the furniture or on strong colors in the wallpapers, do indeed give us foretastes of modernity. A screen based on

Goethe's color theories looks like something dreamed up at the Bauhaus. And the wit of Biedermeier furniture can suggest the over-the-top designs that the Memphis group was producing in Milan a couple of decades ago. But there are also far more mysterious after-images of the Biedermeier world to be found in twentieth-century art and literature. The close-up attentiveness of the Biedermeier sensibility finds distant echoes in the etchings of Morandi and the boxes of Joseph Cornell. And when I looked at a series of Biedermeier glass goblets painted with butterflies, I found myself thinking of Nabokov's butterflies, and the

little pictures of butterflies that he drew on the volumes that he inscribed to his wife. Then it occurred to me that there is something in the magnifying-glass techniques of the great modern novelists, in Proust and Musil and Joyce as well as Nabokov, that harks back to the Romantic empiricism of Biedermeier. There is an idiosyncratic intentness about the Biedermeier moment that may run like a secret stream through the twentieth century. And in our moment, when all the big hopes have proven futile, these more private intensities have a new kind of power. Who can doubt that we are all milder Romantics now? ■

James Wood The Celestial Teapot

LETTER TO A CHRISTIAN NATION

By Sam Harris

(Alfred A. Knopf, 96 pp., \$16.95)

I.

I HAVE NOT BELIEVED IN GOD SINCE I was fifteen, and now, at forty, I suspect that I am too late to change. But the velocity of that flight from belief has not been constant: there have been hesitations, interruptions, acute nostalgias. Like many raised in a religious household, I often find myself caught in a painful, if comic, paradox, whereby I am involved in an angry relationship with the very God whose existence I am supposed to deny. There is the joke of the atheist out fishing with a believing friend. The atheist casts his net and draws up a stone on which is carved: "I do not exist. Signed: God." And the atheist exclaims: "What did I tell you!" Contradictory this kind of atheism might at times be, but those contradictions feed, perhaps constitute, its brand of militancy; it is because God cannot be entirely banished that one is forced to keep on complaining rather than merely finalize one's elegies.

This is the kind of atheism that Dostoevsky was interested in, the kind that stands on the ladder just one rung below belief. For me, though, the gap between those top two rungs was always large, and is now ever wider. I was brought up in a Christian environment that had retained

more than a memory of nineteenth-century evangelicalism. It was not fundamentalist, nor was it literalist: my father was a professor of zoology, a rationalist, a very good scientist. But it was scriptural, with a great burden of meaning and import placed on the Gospels, and on Christ's revolutionary challenge to Nicodemus: one must be born anew, of the spirit rather than the flesh.

Ordinary language was saturated in religiosity. A happy occurrence was a "blessing" or was "providential"; an unhappy one might well have been the product of "sinful" or "unedifying" behavior, and this behavior was almost certainly "unscriptural." An untidy bedroom was evidence of "poor stewardship." I was encouraged not to wish people "good luck," this being rather secular. The word I heard most often, of course, was "faith," since none of the other words could have functioned without it. I was fascinated when from time to time my parents would discuss, in hushed tones, an acquaintance who had "lost his faith." The phrase, so solemnly unsheathed, seemed to point to unimaginable wildernesses.

I did not lose my faith so much as hand it on, since I never really possessed much of one. This, in an admittedly rather circular way, is the first reason that I am not a believing Christian: the roots of that belief were always relatively frail, and gave way easily enough when pressure was applied. Unlike oth-

ers in my family, I had no moment of great conversion or revelation. In addition, a number of other powerful disincentives were presenting themselves to me. I vividly remember the day I sat down with a piece of paper and drew a line down the middle: on one side I would compile my reasons to believe and on the other the reasons not to. Perhaps this was rigged—anyone who does something like this has already lost his faith, well before the pretended ratiocination. It would certainly be hard to imagine anyone led to believe in God by such a method.

On the debit side was: God's failure to answer prayers; the worldwide varieties of religious experiences and traditions, and a feeling that they could not be compatible; and, overwhelmingly, the difficulty of reconciling God with the reality of evil. The standard atheist package, alas. My childhood, which was a happy one, had been marked by my witnessing several deaths from cancer, friends of my parents who were members of their church. Great efforts were made, in the usual charismatic or evangelical way, to save these people. Prayers were raised and raised. Hands were laid on ailing heads, oil was poured. But when it was time for these people to die, they died. After years of hearing thousands of petitions offered to the Lord, I cannot recall a single answered prayer.

How would you know, asks the believer, since God's ways are inscrutable to us? But prayer is one of those cases where an inscrutability argument will not work, because one knows what one has oneself requested, and therefore what has been denied. If you pray for a member of your congregation to get better and she dies, your prayer was not answered. To retort that God's mysterious way of answering your prayer—"but God needed her by his side in heaven, that's why he let her die"—might involve not really answering your prayer at all is essentially to nullify prayer, to kill it. I knew that at fifteen. Years later I read Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, with its extraordinary image of the futility of prayer: a bee, inside a room, mistaking the floral wallpaper for the real thing and briefly attempting to extract its illusory pollen.

MORE DEVASTATING STILL TO belief was the apprehension that there was a grotesque amount of suffering

in the world, and that I could not reconcile this with any of the powers or qualities usually ascribed to God. Even Cardinal Newman, in that terrible, beautiful book *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, acknowledges this crisis:

I look out of myself into the world of men, and there I see a sight which fills me with unspeakable distress. The world seems simply to give the lie to that great truth, of which my whole being is so full; and the effect upon me is, in consequence, as a matter of necessity, as confusing as if it denied that I am in existence myself. If I looked into a mirror, and did not see my face, I should have the sort of feeling which actually comes upon me, when I look into this living busy world, and see no reflexion of its Creator. This is, to me, one of those great difficulties of this absolute primary truth, to which I referred just now. Were it not for this voice, speaking so clearly in my conscience and my heart, I should be an atheist, or a pantheist, or a polytheist when I looked into the world.

Without the succor of Newman's "voice, speaking so clearly in my conscience and in my heart," I can see only a world without a Creator, and a set of intractable cruxes. They are familiar to anyone who has read any theodicy. The existence of great pain and evil in the world limits God's power or qualifies his goodness. If he allows enormous suffering, then he is not good, and if he cannot stop this suffering, then he is not very powerful.

Orthodox theology admits that it cannot "solve" this dilemma. Still, over the centuries all sorts of arguments, some of them eloquent and some merely glib, have been advanced to attempt such a solution. Ancient commentators and believers were tempted to relieve God of some of his power rather than his goodness, by positing a rival lesser God who is responsible for the world's woes—a Satan, or a false God, a demiurge. This is what Newman means by "polytheism." The Old Testament, despite Yahweh's obsession with monotheism, dangles this possibility from time to time, most famously at the beginning of Job, where God arranges with Satan to test their poor victim. Gnosticism and Manichaeism are the best-known versions of this recourse to dualism.

THEOLOGY'S TWO MOST RELIABLE offerings at the bazaar of theodicy are the Soul-Making Theory and the Free Will Defense. The former argues that suffering is some kind of mysterious training, inseparable from worldly existence, and finally a good in its own right. In heaven, anyway, God will "wipe away all tears from their eyes," as the Book of Revelation has it. Dostoevsky seems to have believed this (he was obsessed with that phrase), and Simone Weil, in her essay on affliction, seems to argue that pain is a kind of apprenticeship. When an apprentice hurt himself on the job, she writes, it used to be a saying among workmen that "it is the trade entering his body." But it is not clear why there is so *much* suffering in the world (this is sometimes called "dysteleological suffering"); and the cost of accepting this argument seems to be that God must seem, however lovingly corrective, unbearably cruel. Pierre Bayle, the late seventeenth-century skeptic, likens such a God to a father who lets his son break his leg so that he could have the educative experience of mending it.

The Free Will Defense suggests that for us to act as moral agents we must have free will, and that as soon as we have free will we will abuse it. A world without such freedom would be unimaginable, robotic; moreover, in order for our relations with our Creator to be morally meaningful, we must have the freedom freely to grow and contract in that relationship. We must live in a dappled world, and we can only really conceive of existence in terms of such contrasts—light and shade, good and evil, obedience and disobedience. Free will, to such defenders, is the highest good, higher than human happiness. Again, though, the objection can surely be made that we seem to have so much freedom, more than we need. Origen argued that Judas's evil made possible the good of Jesus's crucifixion, and from here it is but a step to the proposition that Hitler's evil allowed various righteous gentiles to act righteously, and from here it is but a step to the proposition that Hitler's evil is itself a good thing because it allowed Hitler himself the exercise of free will—an argument made in our day by Richard Swinburne, an Oxford theologian. It is the kind of "move" that gives academics a bad name.

What if we had been so constituted that our freedom to act wickedly existed

along a narrower spectrum of possibility? Thieves, bullies, horrid husbands, liars, nasty little onanistic boys, corrupt politicians, stealers of apples and pears and knowledge, defilers of Eden—but no Hitlers, no Stalins, no murderers, no child-killers? Obviously, we cannot imagine what this limited freedom would look like: it does not, in fact, look much like our idea of freedom. But if God had made such a world, we would never have had any experience of our more murderous freedoms, and we would not lament their lack. Such a world would not be without any pain; death would still have its sting. But suffering would have had much of its sting pulled. There would not be so much simply monstrous suffering in the world. Not possible, you say? But as Schopenhauer retorts to Leibniz, even if the world we currently inhabit were the best of all possible worlds, God created both the world "and also the possibility itself, accordingly he should have arranged this with a view to its admitting of a better world."

Actually, the more complete confounder of the Free Will Defense is the concept of heaven (less important to Judaism than to Christianity and Islam). In heaven, it seems, all tears will be wiped away and we will be free of pain and suffering. We will also be free of freedom—necessarily so, because if freedom were to exist in heaven, we would merely replicate our lives on earth and start doing terrible things to each other again. Heaven, as an intellectual category as much as an "actual place," depends on the idea that the highest form of happiness—to be face to face with our Maker, and so on—is a state without freedom, or with severely curtailed freedom. But if this is the ideal state, the state that our Creator longs to have us in, then why was heaven not instituted on earth? Since heaven was not created on earth, we must conclude that our lives here are more or less painful experiments, and that the world is a training ground for heaven.

Yet it is a rigged experiment, since the experiment already knows its own answer. Not just because God, being omniscient, must know what will become of each of us (the Catholic church tied itself up in knots over this issue, and eventually had to repudiate its own doctrine of "double predestination"), but also because a real experiment would put the existence of heaven itself in doubt. A rigged experiment simply puts

our going to heaven in doubt. Yet if heaven must exist, if there is no doubt that heaven exists, then we know that we are being trained here on earth to exercise a free will that will not be needed in heaven, a free will the exercise of which causes immense pain to many people, but a pain that will be miraculously eased in heaven. This is nothing less than a definition of torture. (Though presumably the likes of Richard Swinburne would argue that seventy years of torture versus an infinity of heavenly bliss is a "reasonable" experiment.) Heaven is not and never has been the solution to theodicy; heaven is the very problem.

AS A TEENAGER, OF COURSE, I did not have the philosophical geometry set to map out this horror with the proper lucidity. But I blundered my way to these arguments, and every way I turned I walked into a dark wall. I could not continue to describe this God in the ways my tradition insisted I should, and Jesus's softening of Yahweh's austere awfulness in some ways only aggravated the problem. The Old Testament God, at least, shrinks from attributes, and a vast gulf must separate his unspeakability from our understanding. But Jesus, through his incarnation of God, takes on the very qualities that cannot be attributed to his father: merciful, loving, wise. Above all, he intervenes: he performs miracles, he raises the dead, he is himself raised, and he promises intercession—his own, and the Holy Spirit's. Christ is nothing if not describable. This is the central joy for Christians. Yet the Creator he incarnates is not describable in terms that would make any sense of his providential creation and control of the world. Christ, to me, seems orphaned of the very patrilineage that constitutes his bold appeal. He incarnates what cannot be incarnated. What use is his sonship if his father is lost? To be blunt: to worship Christ, it seemed to me, was to worship the bastard child (in the strict sense of the word) of an absolute bastard (in the vernacular sense of the word). And never forget that Christ came and nothing changed: salvation had to be pushed on again, infinitely deferred to a Second Coming. "Silence, that only Voice of our God," writes Melville in *Pierre*, and "how can a man get a Voice out of Silence."

So what, though, if God cannot easily be described as omnipotent, loving, and

omniscient? Maimonides felt that it was only our human limitations that led us into trying to pin attributes onto God. We cannot comprehend his essence, and merely hurl human constructions at him. We are like the men, he says, who praise an earthly king with lots of gold coin for owning millions of silver coin. It is more becoming to define God by what he is not, and to reflect in silence rather than to utter our incomprehensions. "Silence is praise to Thee," Maimonides approvingly says, quoting Psalm 65, and as if replying to Melville centuries before.

Yet for all the magnificence of its reasoning, this Aristotelian coolness, which Aquinas to some extent shared, leaves me cold. Suspended between Maimonides and Melville—a fine place to be suspended in any other context—we forlornly watch a describable God vanishing into a horizon of negatives. This God is silent, and does not speak to us; and we are silent too, enjoined not to speak to him. He is just the God of the new physics. Above all, though we might come to respect and certainly fear and obey this God, why would we ever worship him? If we know him only by his non-ness, then perhaps non-worship, along with non-love and non-recognition, is the appropriate response? Wittgenstein's little phrase, from a different context, comes to mind: "a nothing will serve just as well as a something about which nothing can be said." And what do we do with our traditions, which insist on telling stories about, insist on describing, this God about which nothing can be said? Of one thing we can be absolutely certain: if God exists, then he—*it, she*—really is nothing like the various representations of him—*it, her*—that our sacred books contain. If God really exists, he is beyond love, beyond worship, beyond reach. A silence beckons to a silence. But if that is the case, our attachment to our religious traditions and descriptions, however noble their approximations, traditions over which we have spilled and continue to spill so much blood, is sentimental tribalism and one of the greatest tragedies in history.

II.

WE ARE IN THE MIDST OF that tragedy, and America is drowning in God's attributes. The Lord will increase your salary, teach your children, raise your self-esteem, boost your career,

be a lifelong friend, and take you into his heart if you only take him into your heart. He is love, and gentleness, and charity, unless he is forbidding homosexuality or stem-cell research or punishing New York with September 11 for its high proportion of gays, lesbians, and degenerates. He greatly dislikes evolutionists, largely because he created the world six thousand years ago. He certainly dislikes Nancy Pelosi—and now, alas, Pastor Ted Haggard. The Bible is his inerrant word. According to recent polls, 53 percent of Americans are creationists, and 87 percent—or 260 million people—claim to "never doubt the existence of God." An avowed atheist cannot be elected president. And so on. You know the stupefying recital. Many millions across the world are absolutely sure they know what God is like, and what he likes. Heine's unbelieving joke, reported by the Goncourt brothers, rises up: on his deathbed, while his wife was praying that God might forgive him, he interrupted her to say, "Have no fear, my darling. He will forgive: that's his profession."

The rise of evangelicalism, and the menace of fundamentalism, along with developments in physics, and in theories of evolution and cosmogony, has encouraged a certain style of public atheistic critique. Many of these names are well-known: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris. The events of September 11 were the direct spur for Harris to write his best-selling book *The End of Faith*, which vibrated with an admirable anger. It has a suggestive thesis, too, which is that America cannot possibly fight fundamentalist Islam while it is itself gripped by Christian fundamentalism. This symmetry of fundamentalisms means that America will not stoop to defeat the religious content—and dangerous idiocy—of its foes. I am not sure if this is exactly provable. Britain, for instance, almost 40 percent of whose citizens profess not to believe in God, has not yet mobilized its secularism in victorious ways (though Harris would doubtless point to Tony Blair's strong Christianity). But it is not his job to win the so-called war on terror, and the essential intellectual approach seems right: attack all the troops of irrational religiosity at once.

The End of Faith starts well and then becomes a bit predictable, because it begins to follow the rules of its rather thin genre. *Letter to a Christian Nation*, which is an open letter to the many Christians

who wrote to Harris in complaint, is even thinner. I have an almost infinite capacity for the consumption of atheistic texts, but there is a limit to how many times one can stub one's toe on the thick idiocy of some mullah or pastor. There is a limit to the number of times one can be told that the Bible is a shaky text, and that Leviticus and Deuteronomy are full of really nasty things. *Ratio vincit omnia*, but the page-by-page demonstration of this rationalist conquering can become wearisome. This may be no especial insult to Harris so much as to his family; Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian* made a great initial impact on me when I was a teenager—it was like seeing someone in the nude, for the first time—until I began to get bored with its self-exposure. Russell complaining that Jesus was not a moral teacher, that he was really rather a bad example because he threw the money lenders out of the temples and cursed the fig tree, seemed somehow a little undignified. Russell is reliably at his least philosophical when he is at his most atheistical.

THE GENRE TENDS TO PROCEED thus: the atheist must first remove all possible respect from religious belief. The tone is a little perky, and lively thought-experiments bloom. They go a bit like this: if I told you that President Bush prays every day to his vacuum cleaner, you would judge him insane. But why is there any evidence that the God he prays to exists? It is fun, knockabout. Harris likes to compare belief in God with belief in Wotan or Zeus: "Can you prove that Zeus does not exist? Of course not. And yet, just imagine if we lived in a society where people spent tens of billions of dollars of their personal income each year propitiating the gods of Mount Olympus."

The model is Bertrand Russell's "celestial teapot," gleefully quoted by Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion*. If, says Russell, I told you that a celestial teapot was orbiting the sun but that you could not see it, nobody would be able to

disprove me; "but if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense." God is like the teapot, we are supposed to infer. Dawkins uses Russell to argue that we cannot prove God's non-existence, but then we cannot prove anything's non-existence. "What matters," writes Dawkins, "is not whether God is disprovable (he isn't), but whether his existence is *probable*.... Some undisprovable things are sensibly judged far less probable than other undisprovable things."

I agree with Dawkins's conclusion, and consider God highly improbable, but I dislike the way he gets there. It seems to occur neither to him nor to Russell that belief in God is not like belief in a teapot. The referent—the content of the belief—matters here. God may be just as undisprovable as the teapot, but belief in God is a good deal more reasonable than belief in the teapot, precisely because God cannot be reified, cannot be turned into a mere thing, and thus entices our approximations. There is a reason, after all, that no one has ever worshiped a teapot: it does not allow enough room to pour the fluid of our incomprehension into it.

Interestingly, Dawkins himself seems to agree with this complaint. In a recent conversation in *Time* with the geneticist Francis Collins (who is a believing Christian), a conversation in which both men spoke eloquently, Dawkins was pushed by Collins to admit that, in Dawkins's words, "there could be something incredibly grand and incomprehensible beyond our understanding." That's God, said Collins. Yes, but it could be any of billions of Gods, replied Dawkins: "the chance of its being a particular God, Yahweh, the God of Jesus, is vanishingly small." In other words, the God of a particular scripture and tradition is a parochial and inherently improbable notion. But the idea of some kind of creator, said Dawkins, "does seem to be a worthy idea. Refutable—but nevertheless grand and big enough to be worthy of respect." To which one should add: by definition, then, this "grand and big" idea is not analogically disproved by referring to celestial teapots or vacuum cleaners, which lack the necessary bigness and grandeur.

My inner atheist nevertheless enjoys the "naughtiness" of this disrespect, even

if a little of it goes a long way. And all these writers are correct to argue that religion is unfairly protected by a *cordon sanitaire* of "respect." In America, all you need to do is intone the word "faith" and your opponent will start backing away from you in terror, like a vampire before a crucifix. In these books the vampire bites back, and Harris has an Orwellian robustness and a good journalistic way with his one-liners. To the creationists who believe that the world is six thousand years old, he says: "This is, incidentally, about a thousand years after the Sumerians invented glue." The principal concern of American Christians "appears to be that the creator of the universe will take offense at something people do while naked." Twenty percent of all recognized pregnancies end in miscarriage, he writes: "if God exists, He is the most prolific abortionist of all."

HAVING SET FIRE TO RELIGION's firewall of respect, the genre moves on to point out that millions of people believe that their religious traditions are the right ones, and that they cannot all be right. Then it is time to dismantle the texts, usually by pointing to historical inconsistencies and moral outrages, such as the Bible's silence on slavery, or God's instruction that heretics, adulterers, and homosexuals should be stoned. From here it is a mere step to arguing that we do not need divine laws—especially given their historically specific nature—in order to be good. Atheists are not wicked, and several studies suggest that they may even be a bit less wicked than religionists. By the way, though Stalin was an atheist, Hitler probably was not. Nazi anti-Semitism was a Christian monster, at bottom, and received plentiful support from the churches. Dawkins and Harris say almost exactly the same thing here. Harris makes the perfectly good point that

Auschwitz, the Soviet gulags, and the killing fields of Cambodia are not examples of what happens to people when they become too reasonable. To the contrary, these horrors testify to the dangers of political and racial dogmatism. It is time that Christians ... stop pretending that a rational rejection of your faith entails the blind embrace of atheism as a *dogma*.... The problem with religion—as with Nazism, Stalinism, or any other totali-

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tarian mythology—is the problem of dogma itself. I know of no society in human history that ever suffered because its people became too desirous of evidence in support of their core beliefs.

This may be a little self-serving, in that “reasonable” is here being defined by what it excludes: it cannot be reasonable to be a Nazi, and therefore Nazism is by definition unreasonable. But communism, of course, put great stock in scientific materialism, in the reason of historical progress. The argument against dogma is quite just, though, and communism can certainly be seen as a rival religion, with messianic tendencies.

III.

THIS BRAND OF PUBLIC ATHEISM is very good at the necessary disrespecting of religion, and it has a properly hygienic function. But how worthy of respect is it itself? The problem is that its bright certainty about the utter silliness of religion leads very quickly away from philosophy and argument. There is a dismaying gap, in these books, between the righteous anger of the critique of the many absurdities of religious belief and the attempts to account for why people have believed this apparent nonsense for so many centuries. I would rather that these writers refrained from speculation altogether than plunge into their flimsy anthropological kit bag. It is peculiar indeed to read Dawkins’s eloquent pages on evolution, and on how evolution may in the end solve the question of who created us, and then to find that very evolutionary theory being applied in the most hypothetical, rampantly unscientific ways to the question of why we have believed in God for so long.

For Dawkins, it may all be explained by our evolutionary need to fall in love, or perhaps by our childish need to have a big friend. At the same time, we have also evolved a HADD, a “hyperactive agent detection device”: “we hyperactively detect agents where there are none, and this makes us suspect malice or benignity where, in fact, nature is only indifferent.” (Daniel Dennett is also fond of the argument from HADD.) Dawkins’s example of this tendency is a moment in *Fawlty Towers* when John Cleese’s car breaks down. Cleese, drunk with HADD, one supposes, starts thrash-

ing his car to death. Dawkins truly appears to think that this high-table guffawing will do as an explanation of why thousands of generations have been drawn to believe in God. And mystical experience of the divine does not detain him, either. We have evolved superb “simulation software in the brain,” which is “especially adept at constructing faces and voices.... It is well capable of constructing ‘visions’ and ‘visitations’ of the utmost veridical power. To simulate a ghost or an angel or a Virgin Mary would be child’s play to software of this sophistication.” And he concludes: “That is really all that needs to be said about personal ‘experiences’ of gods or other religious phenomena.” Evolutionary biologists never seem happier than when they are talking about humans as crafty but malfunctioning computers, with “toolkits” and “menus” and “software.” The possibility that this might itself be a mad “vision,” an example of a highly evolved Oxonian computer on the blink, does not occur to Dawkins’s own simulation software.

The emphasis on evidence, on provability and probability, is an inevitable part of the cleansing rationalism of these books, and is not always unwelcome. Dawkins is careful to talk about the improbability of God’s existence, not his impossibility, though Harris rather too easily lapses into talk about “insufficient evidence”: “It is undeniable that people of faith make heroic sacrifices to relieve the suffering of other human beings. But is it necessary to believe anything on insufficient evidence in order to behave this way?” Yet he surely knows that we believe all kinds of things on insufficient evidence. Or rather, what might be sufficient evidence to him could well be insufficient to someone else and vice versa. Hume was right, says the French philosopher Alain, “to mock the King of Siam who believed that ice was impossible because he had never seen it.” Harris might say that he has sufficient evidence in order to believe in the laws of physics because they have never failed him, but that level of evidence-satisfaction would seem pretty low to a physicist. On what evidence, for instance, does he believe that the universe is expanding?

We have to acknowledge that most religious language cannot be tested for its provability by a philosophical rationalism that anyway defines the terms of that provability. Religious language, as Wittgenstein never tired of pointing out,

is a practice, not an experiment; its referents are defined by how it is used. There are grammatical differences between the use of religious language and ordinary language. One might finally disagree with Wittgenstein, and certainly some of his more irritating followers have wielded his idea of language games as a way of refusing any demand to justify belief in God. I think that Wittgenstein’s notion seems an excellent way of defending a way of life, an embedded habit of religious practice—say, kissing an icon—that already exists; but it is hard to see how any novice, who had never believed, would be led to adopt a religious practice by Wittgenstein’s language. In his world, one seems always to be born into such practices. Conversely, people do indeed lose their faith because they cease to believe in certain propositions (I did); Wittgenstein always seems to treat as lunatic anyone who would want to stop kissing an icon—for him this would be tantamount to wanting to leave one’s family and change one’s surname—because he cannot imagine a propositional content to religion.

THESE ARE NOT EASY QUESTIONS, then, but the jauntily unphilosophical way in which most popular atheistic writing simply ignores the Wittgensteinian dilemmas is disappointing, and explains why its explanations of the sources of religious belief are so jejune. Is there not a kind of insult to language in so comprehensively banning the incomprehensible? Shouldn’t a physicist—a friend of mine—be able to say that, for her, Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* “is God,” without atheism busily correcting her lexical lapse into the unprovable? Dawkins says of James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, “Read such books and marvel at the richness of human gullibility,” as if that solves that. Sam Harris gets himself into a telling knot in *The End of Faith*, when he attempts to float a kind of vaguely Eastern, vaguely New Agey form of

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meditation. (The dirty secret of that book is that Harris turns out to be a Buddhist.) He dislikes having to use words like “spirituality” and “mysticism” because they have “unfortunate associations.” But use them he does, explaining that mystical meditation makes us happy and is good for us, and suggesting that we should do it from time to time. Of course, he thus falls into the very consequentialism that he dislikes in some religious discourse (the kind that says that you should believe in order not to be sinful). Perhaps realizing this, he explains that his kind of mysticism “is a rational enterprise. Religion is not.” He continues:

The mystic has recognized something about the nature of consciousness prior to thought, and this recognition is susceptible to rational discussion.

The mystic has reasons for what he believes, and these reasons are empirical. The roiling mystery of the world can be analyzed with concepts (this is science), or it can be experienced free of concepts (this is mysticism). Religion is nothing more than bad concepts held in place of good ones for all time. It is the denial—at once full of hope and full of fear—of the vastitude of human ignorance.

But this rational mysticism seems a pretty poor substitute for the grandeurs of religious mysticism, however one judges the latter’s empirical content. Harris is welcome to sit on his floor and get off on his Buddhism; I’ll go and sit in a cathedral.

And what does it mean to say that the mystery of the world can be analyzed with scientific concepts? Harris knows as well as anyone else that it is precisely the ultimate mysteriousness of the universe that science has so far failed to explain. The Big Bang theory has gone far in explaining—no, in proving—how the universe first began to expand from an infinitesimal compacting of matter, a theory foreshadowed, in fact, in the speculations of some of the very irrationalists disdained by atheism: ancient and medieval philosophy and theology boldly discusses the idea that space and time were created together. But about the very moment before this first expansion, and the conditions that made it possible, there is only speculation. About this moment, we are all in the dark, and silence calls to silence. ■

Vali Nasr The New Hegemon

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I.

OVER THE PAST THREE years, and with mounting alarm, Iran has steadily held Washington’s gaze, gaining ever more notoriety as one of the most serious foreign policy challenges confronting the United States. An Islamist regime that was being written off on the eve of the second Gulf war is now asserting itself on the world stage and shows no sign of being subdued. Iran sees itself as a great power, and it is pursuing the nuclear capability that would confirm this self-image. It believes that it can play a global role and expects to be treated as a peer by the United States. Washington was certainly caught off guard by the surge in Iranian influence, and more so by the confident and provocative attitude that the country’s hard-line leadership has lately put on display. As Iran has become more important to the United States, so has the problem of dealing with the Iranian question become the bugbear of the Bush administration. America’s Iraq policy is becoming more and more overshadowed by America’s Iran policy, whatever that is. The Bush administration has staked a very great deal on Iraq, but in the end it may be the administration’s handling of Iran, more than of North Korea or even of Al Qaeda, that defines the Bush era in foreign policy.

Looking at matters from the Iranian side, it is easy to see the Bush years as a turning point. After September 11, Iran faced a bullish Washington that saw no need for engagement and was quick to condemn Iran as a member of the “axis of evil.” The Islamic Republic was then seen as teetering on the verge of collapse, threatened by the democratic ideals of its own youthful population and those of an American president with ambitious plans to change the Middle East in order to help fight the scourge of terrorism—a tired dictatorship on its last legs, collapsing under the combined weight of its sluggish economy (which still cannot create nearly enough jobs for all those young people) and its brutish political regime. All that was needed for Iran to join the other dictatorships born of ideology and revolution in the garbage heap of history was a final nudge in the form of outside support for Iranian dissidents, and the example of democracy arising on either side in neighboring Afghanistan and Iraq.

How things have changed, and how quickly. Listening now to Iran’s militant president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as he confidently rallies the Third World under the banner of anti-Americanism, it is hard to see the Islamic Republic as a government on its way out. The Iranian regime is bold and assertive. It is stronger and steadier now than it was in 2001, and its rulers know this. These hard-liners have weathered the reformist challenge at home and have turned the tables on Washington. Iran has more influence on Afghan and Iraqi politics than vice versa—and this influence is far from friendly to democracy, though it might become helpful from the point of view of stability (in which Iran has a bigger stake than is sometimes realized inside the Beltway).

Ahmadinejad will continue to be a

Vali Nasr is a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School and an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. He is the author of THE SHIA REVIVAL: HOW CONFLICTS WITHIN ISLAM WILL SHAPE THE FUTURE (Norton).

problem. Since his surprising election to the presidency in 2005, he has shocked the world with the things he has said, and with his letter to the American president, part sermon and part diatribe against the West. He never fails to highlight Iran's defiance; he is never shy about making threats. Ahmadinejad's continuous references to the Shia messiah have led some in the West to argue that he is gunning for Armageddon, although there is little evidence in Shia eschatology or in Ahmadinejad's rhetoric to support such an apocalyptic conclusion. His tough words on the nuclear issue, his virulent attacks on Israel, and his denials of the veracity of the Holocaust have been outrageous and alarming.

It would be comforting if one could simply dismiss Ahmadinejad—arguably the lucky winner of a confused, multi-candidate presidential race—as a not-ready-for-prime-time demagogue and a revolutionary-era relic providing some dark comedy before more pragmatic hands (possibly belonging to the group around unelected Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei) take the helm. Yet his brand of militancy is making matters worse at a time of increased tensions in American-Iranian relations, and also of greater uncertainty about which subset of hardliners really rules Iran: the clerical guardians of the revolution, whose outlook may have been tempered by time and experience, or the new breed of militaristic radicals represented by Ahmadinejad and his backers in the Revolutionary Guards. Is he a lone voice or the face of a new and even more dangerous Iran?

THE UNITED STATES HAS FOUND it increasingly difficult to deal with Iran in part because the Iranian challenge is directly tied to changes that have been sweeping the larger Middle East. Not only is Iran important to the fate of its neighbors Afghanistan and Iraq, but lately it has managed to influence developments farther afield, in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories. Egypt and Jordan fear that Iran will overshadow them regionally, while Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf monarchs—all of whom are Sunnis ruling over sizeable numbers of Shias—worry about the spread of an aggressive Iranian hegemony over their domains. The prospect of Tehran dictating security and oil policy, and—most worrisome—intervening on behalf of local Shia populations, has rulers across the region

pressing Washington to contain Iran. Pundits and policymakers in Washington have responded with proposals for an American-led regional alliance for this purpose, but in reality there is not much military power or political will in the region to take on the seventy-million-strong and incipiently nuclear Iran. Iran's Arab neighbors do not have the military capability to contain Iran and are vulnerable to backlash from an American attack on Iran. They may subsidize a containment strategy, but in truth they want the United States to do the job.

Tehran has benefited from America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The fall of the Taliban and the Saddam regime removed significant bulwarks against Iranian ambition and influence. As the occupation of Iraq has depleted American power and prestige, making Iran harder to contain, Iran has seized the opportunity to spread its wings. Rising Iranian clout has fed and been fed by the Shia revival that swept across the Middle East in the wake of the Iraq war. The United States regards Iranian material and moral support for Iraq's Shia parties and militias as part of the problem in Iraq, but can do little to stop it. But it was not the conflict in Iraq that most vividly advertised Iran's regional ambitions; it was the summer war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon. From the outset, Israel and the United States blamed Iran for the fighting. Tehran denied a direct role in causing the conflict (although it is difficult to believe that Hezbollah would have done as it did without consulting Tehran), but heaped praise on Hezbollah (even as Sunni regimes were condemning the Shia movement) and supplied it with sophisticated weaponry. The latest demonstration of its reach gave Tehran another opportunity to change the balance of power with Washington in Iran's favor.

What Iran sowed in Lebanon, it expects to reap in Iraq. Washington may debate the merits of talking to Iran about Iraq, but Tehran has already hinted that it, along with its ally Syria, holds most of the cards. Their shadow looms large over Lebanon as Hezbollah has tightened its grip and the specter of civil war has come back to haunt the country in the wake of the assassination of Pierre Gemayel, the leading anti-Syrian Maronite politician. Before the Iraq Study Group could argue the case for engaging Iran, Tehran held its own

security summit on Iraq, suggesting that it does not need an American invitation to become involved, and that if the United States wants to deal with Iran it has to think again about the terms of such an engagement.

AHMADINEJAD'S IRAN CELEbrates defiance. More than any leading Iranian figure since the Ayatollah Khomeini himself, Ahmadinejad appears to take seriously the old revolutionary goal of positioning Iran as the leading country of the entire Muslim world—an ambition that requires focusing on themes (such as hostility to Israel and the West) that tend to bring together Arabs and Iranians, Sunni and Shia, rather than divide them, even as it demands efforts to push traditional Arab Sunni allies of the West off to the sidelines. Far from being eager to appease the West, Iran relishes the attention that its nuclear program and extreme rhetoric have generated. In September, when Ahmadinejad visited the United Nations in New York, he forcefully defended Iran's right to develop nuclear technology, and did not spare the world body in his tirade against Western oppression of the Third World.

His stridency at Turtle Bay stood in stark contrast to his smug and crude and obtuse interactions with reporters and academics and opinion-makers, notably at a controversial meeting with members of the Council on Foreign Relations. Ahmadinejad certainly has street smarts. Formally, his office is not even particularly powerful (its last occupant, the putatively reformist cleric Mohammad Khatami, found himself reduced to a cipher despite having handily won two elections), but Ahmadinejad has astutely made himself bigger than the office through his high profile. But the street is a narrow place, and street smarts are not the same as world smarts. He quite obviously lacks the wisdom and the foresight needed to navigate Iranian policy through the challenges that it faces today. Despite record-high oil prices, unemployment in Iran continues to fuel political unrest and social ills, and the resentments that helped to elect Ahmadinejad can also be his undoing.

After all, Iran has much to lose if its nuclear gambit galvanizes international support for economic sanctions—and even worse, military action—to scale back its nuclear program. Iran also has to walk a tightrope between asserting

regional hegemony and maintaining cordial relations with its Arab neighbors. Iran supports the greater empowerment of Shias in the Middle East, but it stands to lose if the Sunni backlash coming out of Cairo and Riyadh were to capture popular attention. A still greater challenge for the inexperienced demagogue in Tehran is how to prevent the emergence of an anti-Iranian American-Israeli-Arab alliance, as Tehran's policies continue to generate fear in Washington and in capitals across the region. There is little in Ahmadinejad's behavior and rhetoric to suggest that he understands the complexity of the challenges facing Iran, or the delicate touch that is needed if Iran is to realize its interests. This may be good news, or not.

TAKING THEIR CUES FROM AHMADINEJAD, Iranian diplomats now brazenly drag their feet in negotiations and tease Europeans with hints of compromise before balking at the prospects of a settlement. Defiance, they seem to argue, has benefited Iran so far. On the nuclear issue, it has softened the position of the West, which has made far more concessions since Ahmadinejad became president than it did before he won the office. Defiance has also made the Persian-speaking Shia Iran popular on the infamous Arab street and given Ahmadinejad the aura of a Third World champion, a latter-day Sukarno or Nasser. What is rightly worrisome to America is that Ahmadinejad is clearly determined to use his newfound prominence to ratchet up tensions in the Middle East and beyond. Under Ahmadinejad, Iran is bolstering the Arab rejectionist position on the Israeli-Palestinian question, scuttling all talk of peace and regularly denying Israel's right to exist. This hostile and mischievous posture, coming at a time of impasse in Arab-Israeli relations, can only serve to deepen the chasm between Israel and its neighbors. When he is in Jakarta or Caracas, Iran's maverick president strikes other notes, lamenting imperialist exploitation of the Third World and manipulating anti-globalization sentiment in order to stir up anti-Americanism and show that Iran is not alone in holding a grudge against the United States.

This is not, to put it mildly, the Iran that America expected. Ahmadinejad may confirm the image of the "axis of evil" in Washington, but no one expected Iran to wield as much power as it

does today. It is difficult to fathom how quickly Iran has changed and how ambitious it has become, regionally and globally. It wants to claim nothing less than great-power status, and it sees nuclear weapons as the short road to that goal. Iran craves recognition from and engagement with the West, and above all the United States, but it wants these things on its own terms. Iranian officials no longer fear America's wrath, and they often remark that America needs them more than they need America. Iran, they intimate, is not looking for security guarantees, but rather is willing to give them. Iran covets a sphere of economic and political influence in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Persian Gulf. The economies of Dubai, Herat, and Najaf are already closely tied to that of Iran. Iran has invested in clients and allies across the region, expecting to exert influence through them. What Iran wants is for the United States to accept Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Persian Gulf as Iran's "near abroad"—a zone of influence in which Iran's interests would determine ebbs and flows of politics unencumbered by American interference—and to recognize Iranian presence in Syria and Lebanon. If Tehran's current ambiguous stance on talks with the United States is any indication, the masters of the Islamic Republic believe that they can afford to wait until Washington comes around to their point of view.

In sum, a torment and a problem.

II.

AT ALL HURDLE THAT AMERICAN policymakers must clear in order to formulate effective ways of dealing with Iran is to figure out just who is making which decisions in a country that often looks utterly inscrutable from the outside—and maybe from the inside, too, for all we know. Iran's opaque political scene includes different centers of power: the Supreme Leader's office, the parliament, the presidency, the Revolutionary Guards, and the clerical elite, but also a constellation of formal and informal foundations, organizations, and councils. At the top of this labyrinthine structure sits the Supreme Leader, who under the Islamic Republic's constitution holds all the strings. Unelected and unaccountable, Ayatollah Khamenei has the last word on where Iran stands on the nu-

clear issue and its posture toward the United States. But Khamenei is not a decisive leader; he prefers to consult and "build consensus," which in practice means letting various points of view fight it out before he chooses whom to support. A great deal of debate and lobbying surrounds each decision as it meanders its way through the councils of power. More happens behind the scenes than in formal meetings. The result is that decision-making has been slow and chaotic, though the final compromises end up being more durable.

This is far from a model to look up to, and many in Iran fault the disorganized process for the country's many problems. To solve the problem, in recent years more authority has been given to the Supreme Council for National Security in the hope that it would cut the Gordian knot of endless jockeying and deliberation. But the confusion has persisted. The Security Council's chief, Ali Larijani, reports directly to the Supreme Leader and is officially in charge of the nuclear negotiations, but what he says is routinely at odds with Ahmadinejad's statements. In August 2006, for instance, Larijani told Javier Solana, the chief European negotiator, that Iran was pondering a voluntary two-month suspension of uranium-enrichment activities, and promised to finalize the matter at a meeting in New York in September, when world leaders converged at the United Nations for the General Assembly session. The prospect of a deal even led Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to suggest that she would be willing to meet with her Iranian counterpart. But Ahmadinejad showed up in New York before Larijani, and he quickly denied that Iran had made any such offer, leaving the impression that either Solana had missed something in translation or that Larijani had spoken out of turn. Larijani never showed up, and Ahmadinejad dashed any hopes for a high-level U.S.-Iran meeting in New York.

In recent months Larijani has done the negotiating, but Ahmadinejad has set the tone. It is an open question whether episodes such as this are signs of an intense power struggle between the Islamic Republic's old guard and Ahmadinejad's Young Turks, or an unintended result of a chaotic policymaking process, or a deliberate strategy of good cop, bad cop. In recent months Ahmadinejad has used rallies and interviews to put his own stamp on Iran's foreign policy.

He has also appointed close associates, most with no foreign-policy experience but plenty of ideological zeal, to key positions. Kazem Jalali, who helped write Ahmadinejad's epistle to Bush, has been elevated to deputy foreign minister. Another senior adviser, Mojtaba Hashemi Samareh, was dispatched to Paris in late summer 2006 to discuss France's troop deployment in Lebanon with President Chirac. Samareh was subsequently named deputy interior minister.

The Iranian president is clearly doing his best to get a tighter grip on power. But it is not at all clear how far he can go, or whether he has the Supreme Leader's support, or whether he even needs it. Ahmadinejad is a genuine ideologue with extremist religious views, but he is also a clever opportunist. The immediate task before him is political survival at home. America is important to him at this point insofar as its opposition and humiliation gives him an advantage in the dogfight in Tehran. Washington should not look for clues about Iran's intentions in Ahmadinejad's rhetoric alone. It must better understand what is at stake in the struggle for power in Tehran. Since Ahmadinejad has already brought Washington into that fight, perhaps Washington should figure out a way to have a greater say in how it will influence the outcome.

IF EVER AMERICAN POLICYMAKERS needed level-headed analysis to help them understand how Iran sees the world and its role in it, and who makes decisions in Iran and how, it is now. These books by Ali Ansari, Shahram Chubin, and Ray Takeyh, scholars all, go a long way toward serving this need. For those who want to know how we got to where we are, Ansari provides a fresh perspective. His book is an informative account of American-Iranian relations, spanning some five decades, and it is particularly useful in explaining why Tehran and Washington have so far failed to bury the hatchet. In this telling, historical memories and mutual recriminations loom large, overshadowing the rational thinking and the strategic interests that should draw the United States and Iran together. It is true that Iranian involvement in Iraq has been an irritant to Washington. But so far Iran has supported the political process—elections, constitution, and governments included—that the United States introduced to Iraq. Iran does not

want Iraq to fail or break up, and the idea of a civil war next door is certainly worrisome to Tehran. Iran wants the Shia government in Baghdad to succeed, and for Shias to consolidate the gains that they have made since 2003. So why has Iraq failed to bring Tehran and Washington together?

It is the vitriol against America and Israel on the Iranian side, and the "ritual condemnation of Iran" and the fact that "no rhetorical flourish, no level of hyperbole, seems excessive" on the American side, that Ansari sees as the root cause of the estrangement. *Confronting Iran* covers familiar terrain: the CIA-backed coup of 1953; the hostage crisis of 1979; confrontations during the Iran-Iraq war, and later in Lebanon and Iraq; and above all the nuclear issue. What is unique here is that Ansari relies extensively on the impressions that he has gathered from his many encounters with Iranian leaders and opinion-makers. The narrative is very much an insider's view into the Iranian political mentality.

Ansari laments that Iran has been unfairly castigated by Washington. Iran, he writes, is neither as uncooperative nor as aggressive as it is made out to be: "After all, Iran, unlike Iraq, had not invaded anyone, nor had it been defeated in war." Iranian behavior, he says, is driven not by ideology or malice, but by ambition and self-interest. But there is precious little in the rhetoric coming out of Tehran to merit such optimism in the West. Ambition and self-interest are there, no doubt, but surely Ansari sees Iranian leaders as more pragmatic than they themselves claim to be. Ideology still matters to the Islamic Republic; it must be given its due in continuing to shape Tehran's worldview.

Iran's attitude has been hardening as of late, reflecting a growing willingness to challenge international norms and the American position in the Middle East. But this, Ansari maintains, is owed to a purely strategic calculation: as Iran seeks to assert its position in the Middle East, it will have to contend with American power and Israeli interests, which Ansari argues have much to do with American policy toward Iran. Why would Iran challenge rather than accommodate the United States in this quest for power—is it ideological fervor and anti-Western Islamic radicalism? Not according to Ansari. Iran still nurses bitterness toward the United States, he writes, and this colors its strategic outlook. Iran's

posture is born of a feud that continues to smolder on the embers of the memory of the CIA-backed coup of 1953 and America's help to Saddam's army in the 1980s. Iranian leaders see history and interpret its grievances through the distorted lens of their ideological outlook, which demonizes America and absolves Iranian rulers of the violence that they have visited on America.

This is not an adequate analysis. There is no country without historical grievances: why must Iran's be so destructive to itself and to its relations with the world? Is it the gravity of the wrongs of the past or the dogged determination of Iran's leaders to nurse grudges that is the problem? It is difficult to accept at face value that the United States bears the brunt of the blame for the sorry state of U.S.-Iran relations, or even that there is equal blame to go around. The United States is guilty of many mistakes, but the blame for the hostage crisis and the brazen anti-Americanism of Iran's revolution surely does not lie with America. The image of an Iran wronged by history may not persuade many in policy-making circles in Washington to adopt a gentler approach to Iran, but understanding the grievances that Ansari enumerates may help many to better understand the mindset at play in Tehran.

FOR THOSE PRIMARILY INTERESTED in the imbroglio over nuclear weapons, Shahram Chubin provides a concise and insightful look into why Iran wants nuclear capability and how it intends to go about getting it. Chubin traces the origins of Iran's nuclear program back to the bloody eight-year Iran-Iraq war that Saddam launched against the infant Islamic Republic in 1980, but he is quick to point out that "the principal motive for developing nuclear technology appears to be domestic legitimation of the regime ... exploiting nationalist sentiments." The program went into overdrive in 1999, when Saddam's Iraq was still being at least somewhat contained by sanctions, and when the United States and Iran were closer to a breakthrough in their relations than at any other time since the Iranian revolution. But 1999 was also the peak year of the reformist movement, when the flowering of intellectual activity combined with boisterous student demonstrations and a flurry of civil society activism to threaten the Islamic Republic with the prospect of having to

make serious political changes. Chubin suggests that nationalism galvanized by pride in the nuclear program (the potent combination of nukes and nationalism in Pakistan and India was surely not lost on Tehran) and fueled by a sense of confrontation with the West was one tool that the ruling clerics used to help blunt the reformist challenge. Generally speaking, it is impossible to understand the problem of nuclear proliferation unless one grasps the domestic dimension, the cultural and political valence, of this awesomely powerful weaponry.

As the nuclear program expanded, so did the confidence of Iran's leaders. By the time the program attracted international attention, the reformist challenge was gone, but not the nationalist rhetoric and posturing associated with the regime's effort to squelch the reformists' appeal. Iran closely tied its nuclear ambition to the "demand for independence, equality and respect," Chubin observes. Rather than by strategic arguments, Iran's unwavering demand for acceptance of its nuclear ambition is driven in equal parts by a feeling of aggrievement and a feeling of entitlement. Iranian leaders see their country as a great power, and would like their compatriots to give them credit for gaining Iran its due place in the world. The leadership also believes that the nuclear issue provides the strongest lever that Iran can wield in order to realize its international ambitions, ranging from normalization of relations with the West to asserting Iranian hegemony in the Middle East.

Iran's leaders believe—at times it appears naïvely—that they can rally support for their position so long as they claim that they seek only civilian nuclear energy and that their program remains within the bounds of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The nuclear issue, both a mark of power and a bargaining chip, can therefore serve as the fulcrum for changing Iran's international status, but only up to a point. This is a strategy that will work only so long as the international community does not reach a consensus on stopping Iran's program in its tracks. Once that line is crossed, the nuclear program will likely be as much a burden as an asset to an ambitious Iran. But Iranian leaders do not believe that they have reached that point yet. It is fair to assume that even if they did, Iran would accept the costs, absorb international pressure, and continue on its march to nuclear status.

Chubin's analysis does not hold much hope for negotiations to stop Iran's nuclear program. There is certainly no evidence that Tehran is even considering such a possibility.

The great debate in Iran, writes Chubin, is between those who argue that the country can get more cooperation from the West by cooperating more with the West, and those who believe that the West responds better to defiance and that Iran does not have to accommodate the West to achieve its goals. The first camp set the tone for Iran's conciliatory attitude toward the International Atomic Energy Agency until 2005. It was then that Ahmadinejad became president and quickly changed the nation's course. His anti-Israel rhetoric, Chubin remarks, amounted to a "complete and studied indifference to and contempt for international opinion." He writes: "In its twenty-seventh year, it is not clear whether the Islamic Republic of Iran ... still rejects the international system and seeks to overturn it, or is striving to improve its position within the system." Therein lies the challenge: how to approach an Iran that is struggling to decide its own future, and more important, how to influence that choice. Is it engagement or containment that will most effectively nudge Iran in the right direction? Unfortunately, Chubin's fine analysis provides few clues in this regard.

THE TASK IS MADE ALL THE more difficult by America's misreading of Iran. Washington has come to see Iran as a crude totalitarian regime still driven by Islamic ideology—and since Ahmadinejad's rise to power, also by millenarianism—and divorced from its population. And Iran's provocative rhetoric has done little to change this stereotype in Washington, where Iran continues to be seen only as a rogue state, a sponsor of terrorism, a member of the "axis of evil." Yet there is more to Iran, argues Ray Takeyh in his smart, persuasive, and timely book. If Washington is going to get it right, then it must see Iran as it is. Takeyh incisively dissects Iranian foreign policy and meticulously explains how history, ideology, and nationalism combine to decide how and why Iran sees the world as it does.

Takeyh's narrative is rich and accessible, laying bare the paradoxes that dominate Iranian politics and the complexities that the United States faces in

dealing with them. Takeyh also shows great dexterity in looking through the jumble of Islamic ideology and nationalism, driven by intense factional and institutional rivalries, to identify Iran's strategic logic. He argues that Iran is no longer a revolutionary state eager to export its ideology and to shape the region in its own image. It wishes, rather, to influence the politics and the economies of its neighbors to its own advantage. It is driven more by what it sees as national interest than by ideology—although one no doubt colors how the other is interpreted.

Iran is "a state divided between competing centers of power and profoundly differing conceptions of political authority." The Islamic Republic, since its inception, has claimed to represent the popular will. The populist and Islamist ethos of the revolution was encapsulated in a theocratic constitution that vested ultimate authority in the office of the Supreme Leader, a cleric who is not elected, is not accountable to any authority, and, as "guardian" of the masses, is the final arbiter and interpreter of all laws, with total veto power over the decisions of all branches and institutions of the state and society. Yet the Islamic Republic also distributes legislative and executive offices through regular elections. Both the theocratic and the elected bodies of the state claim populist legitimacy. The Islamic Republic is thus based on competing and contradictory claims to legitimacy. It is difficult to determine where authority really rests in such a system—in the "Islamic" or the "republican" dimensions of the state—or how this confusion finds its mandate in society. One thing, though, is clear: thinking of Iran solely in terms of Saddam's Iraq or Qaddafi's Libya is a mistake.

It is also not useful to assume that the Iranian leadership is deeply divided in a way that leaves some camps ripe for American co-optation. Iran's leaders, writes Takeyh, share a keen sense of history—colored by the experience of the revolution and the imprint of Islamic ideology—and they think in terms of national interest. Yet there is also much debate in the halls of power in Tehran, and there is far more room for pragmatism than is often acknowledged. The United States may not get obvious cooperation, let alone friendship, from the Iranian regime, but it could potentially influence its policies and find ways to deal with it.

To underscore his point, Takeyh provides an accessible history of Iran's outlook on the world since the revolution of 1979. The picture that emerges is of a radical leadership that has come of age and is eager to expand and exert power, but is cognizant of the need to immerse Iran in the world. In the 1990s, Iran's leaders sought to end their country's isolation by building relations with Russia and China and expanding trade with Europe. Today, even as Iran courts international sanctions by refusing to relent in its quest for nuclear power, it continues to see its future as tied to hopes for engagement with the larger world. Even Ahmadinejad's defiance is designed to extend Iran's influence in the Arab and Muslim world and more broadly in the Third World. But defiance and Third Worldism will take Iran only so far, and that may prove to be the limit to Ahmadinejad's power in Iran. A country determined to be recognized as an international power broker will sooner or later recognize the problems with Ahmadinejad's way and look beyond him.

TAKEYH LEAVES NO DOUBT THAT Iran is in the throes of change, not least as a consequence of the cultural dynamism that still exists in this authoritarian state. The only country in the world that compares with Iran in the size of its gap between a high level of social development (as measured by such widely recognized indices as Internet connectivity and female literacy) and a low level of political and social freedom is the nervous little city-state of Singapore. The chasm that divides the vitality of Iranian society from the leaden-handed Islamist state is real, and suggests that in the long run the Islamic Republic will not be able to keep the lid on. Yet the expectation of eventual change does not warrant the assumption that the Islamic Republic is presently unstable or about to fall to a democratic revolution. Nor is there any reason to expect that a democratizing Iran will swiftly renounce nuclear ambitions. Democracy promotion is not a substitute for non-proliferation strategy.

Rather than waiting for a different Iran or pursuing the "chimera of regime change," argues Takeyh, the United States should accept that for the foreseeable future it will be competing with the Islamic Republic in the Middle East, but that within the framework of competition opportunities for cooperation might

be found and exploited. One such opportunity could have to do with the question of an Iranian stake in the stability of Iraq. While Tehran is no doubt playing the game of backing certain elements—some of them none too benign—among the Iraqi Shia, an Iran that aspires to prestige and influence in the wider Muslim world cannot welcome the prospect of an all-out Sunni-versus-Shia throw-down in the Land Between the Rivers. The Iranian leaders know that while Shias may be a majority in their own country and in Iraq, they are a fairly small minority (maybe 15 percent) in the larger Muslim world, which is and will remain overwhelmingly Sunni.

TAKEYH ARGUES THAT "GETTING Iran right" will help Washington bring greater stability to the Middle East and more effectively manage the Iranian challenge. But will it also help Iran "get America right"? Will a more sober American policy toward Iran change Iran's attitude toward Israel? Iran has routinely underestimate the American commitment to Israel's security, and Ahmadinejad seems to think that Iran can engage the United States while also ratcheting up the rhetoric against Israel. Without a change in Tehran's attitude, it is difficult to see how Iran's rocky relationship with Washington can evolve toward stability. Takeyh seems to suggest that not much is likely to change until the relations between the United States and Iran get past the current confrontational phase to find a stable rhythm. The United States is likely to get more from Iran—including on Israel—once the two countries have a mature relationship. Such a relationship will have to begin with serious engagement, and that is likely to succeed, Takeyh says, where U.S. and Iranian "strategic interests coincide." Iraq and Afghanistan provide such a possibility, and in the coming months those countries may serve as the venue for engagement.

Iran, after all, is not the first regional challenge of this kind that the United States has faced. America successfully engaged communist China at the height of the Vietnam War, and embraced a leadership in Beijing that was responsible for the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. And that engagement brought stability to Asia and laid the foundations for change in China. Five years ago, moreover, the United States engaged Iran over the fate of Afghanistan. The

Taliban regime was about to fall, and the United States was eager to bring peace and prosperity to Afghanistan after decades of war. Both Iran and America had opposed the Taliban, and both were allied with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Iran, much like the United States, wanted stability in Afghanistan. A common interest provided a framework for cooperation. But successful engagement did not go far; it did not lead to normalization of relations.

Iraq now presents a similar opportunity. Iran, like the United States, does not want Iraq to fail. The collapse of Iraq would lead to a civil war that would prove costly to Iran in every way. Such a war could produce an independent Kurdish state; it could force Iran to intervene militarily in Iraq or to finance the Shia campaign in that country. Civil war would also sour Iran's relations with its Arab neighbors and tarnish its image from Cairo to Jakarta. More so than Iraq's other neighbors, Iran has supported the American-backed government in Baghdad. At face value, then, there is strategic common ground between the United States and Iran in Iraq. But for now the United States is not keen to adopt a strategic road map with Iran; and Iran does not see Iraq as Afghanistan redux. Washington wants minimal gains in the form of better security in Iraq from any contact with Iran, whereas Tehran will yield only if there is a path to normalization of relations. The two countries are so close and yet so far from seeing eye to eye on Iraq and beyond.

All the wisdom of these books, and all their sense of complexity and possibility notwithstanding, there remains the Ahmadinejad problem. He is still the popular president of his country. But as Takeyh makes amply clear, Iranian foreign policy does not begin or end with the former mayor of Tehran and his brand of rambunctious radicalism. There is a rough road ahead, but he may still end up as a casualty of a more mature American-Iranian relationship. ■

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CAMBRIDGE DIARIST Celebridreck

ENTITLEMENT, THE CURRENT national character flaw, has gone about as far as it can go. The toadying to award-show presenters (those stars chosen to read the names of nominees and winners from cue cards) has reached such obscene levels of lagniappe that the government has stepped in and said they're going to slap a gift tax on all the swag these people are receiving in their "gift bags." Whereas you or I might take home a goody bag from a charity event (maybe a t-shirt, a CD, or a little flacon of perfume), our Hollywood cousins have been finding in *their* bags round-the-world airline tickets and \$10,000 wristwatches. Manufacturers of high-end luxury goods are actually fighting to get into the bag, as it were. The loot has become so valuable that, on a "Sopranos" cameo last season, Lauren Bacall had her gift bag stolen by a pair of Jersey henchmen. She was a perfect choice of victim, I thought, for she's known to be quite close with a buck. (Years ago, when David Merrick produced a play on Broadway in which she starred, he told everyone she would take home rolls of toilet paper from her dressing room. But I digress.)

ENTITLEMENT HAS SPREAD LIKE A SOCIETAL athlete's foot into many areas of American life, but nowhere has it achieved the same traction as in the world of the Famous Face. I know a little something about this. Though never illustrious myself, I was for years a satellite to celebrities in two different arenas. My mother was a famous newspaperwoman (Ann Landers), and a former husband (Ken Howard) was a Tony- and Emmy-winning actor. Both of these people could lay claim to genuine prominence derived from talent and accomplishment. But, even for those with earned bona fides, there was always the dirty little secret underlying fame. It is this: The favors, perks, and adoration accorded the celebrated are so out of whack as to be disturbing. Entitlement happens. Even when I was the beneficiary of special handling, I always knew there was something unfair, if not silly, about the fawning flattery elicited by the Famous Face. When I

traveled with my mother, a Special Services agent always escorted her onto the plane, carrying her hand luggage. When I traveled with Mr. Howard, beginning in "The White Shadow" years, more than one airline captain would walk back from the cockpit to say what an "honor" it was to have him on board. Even as the smiling consort/co-beneficiary, I found this ridiculous—just as I did being fished out of lines at movie theaters in Westwood and being invited in as "guests" of the management; being whisked into booked restaurants because a Famous Face was considered desirable; never being allowed to pick up a check because "civilians" loved the connection (however tenuous) with fame.

ALAS, THE WAY CELEBRITIES ARE catered to in private is even worse... as in "unreal." The sky's the limit, because no one ever says "no" to them. Divas—dating back to the Roman amphitheater no doubt—have always made robust demands for their dressing rooms. But their wish lists couldn't possibly compare with the current celebs' "request" for four cases of a specified brand of mineral water, only white flowers, just red M&Ms, scented candles, a footstool no higher than five inches, and a partridge in a pear tree. The irony was not lost on me when, years ago in Chicago, I was out to dinner with Jonas Salk—who went totally unrecognized in the restaurant. Just before we left, Tab Hunter appeared, and, of course, he was mobbed.

THERE IS NO DISPUTING THAT THE PUBLIC has always been awestruck by the famous. The problem at hand, however, is that the standards for fame have gone to hell, and now everybody and his dog want to be in the limelight simply because the perks seem like fun. B-list performers, for example, now go everywhere with their entourage—including, of course, bodyguards. I remember, when I lived in West Los Angeles, seeing Cary Grant walking around doing chores—and he was by his lonesome. Go figure.

ALONG WITH THE DOLLAR, WE'VE EXPERIENCED a regrettable devaluation of

celebrity. Anyone over 30 cannot help but wonder: What the hell happened? The news-ingesting public is bombarded with fake news of the faux famous, but... who *are* these people? Did the mainstream media purposely dumb things down to offer us the current surplus of celebridreck? This is a chicken-and-egg debate, to be sure, trying to figure out how a bunch of anorexic, addled, addicted nobodies morphed into household names. Did the press lead us down this loony path, thinking it profitable, or did the paying customers make known their yen for drivel? Could people be so depressed by national and personal problems that they get a media-delivered serotonin fix by keeping tabs on people who think going to parties is a job? Might celebridreck be taking the place soap operas used to occupy as diversions from dull lives—but with real people? It is a sad fact that if Monopoly were a game played with modern-day "celebrities" standing in for real estate, we would be trading a Flavor Flav for a Jessica Simpson.

THERE HAS CERTAINLY BEEN A SEA change in how you get to *be* a celebrity. Actions formerly disdained because they were criminal, shameful, or, at the very least, déclassé, now make their practitioners into public figures. These days, attention is a loopy kind of Alice-in-the-looking-glass reward for bad behavior—and it lasts way longer than 15 minutes. It is now possible to achieve celebrity status by assaulting employees, entering rehab, or screwing for posterity courtesy of your video cam. Whereas a wayward rich kid or round-heeled bimbo used to rate a passing mention in the public prints—maybe—now these unfortunates are catnip for journalists. The magic carpet for the publicity hungry is now red and so heavily trafficked as to have lost all meaning. I, frankly, don't give a rat's ass about Sir Paul's marital mistake, Paris Hilton, or the ruckus about Madonna's adopted African kid. Good celebrity gossip, like the celebrities, just ain't what it used to be. Perhaps the whole situation can be summed up with this joke: A middle-aged woman was reminiscing that, when she and her friends were young, they all wanted to look like Elizabeth Taylor. Now they all do.

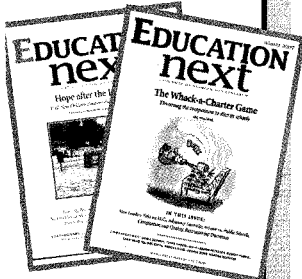
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Teacher unions and other charter opponents openly wage war against charters. But there is also evidence of a perhaps more damaging, less public war. Interviews with more than 400 charter school operators from coast to coast have revealed widespread combat. The goal appears to be to stop charter schools in any way possible. The resistance may take place at the school's inception, when it first looks to purchase a building and comply with municipal zoning laws. It may come when opponents play games with transportation, when legal barriers are tossed in the way, or when false information about charters is widely disseminated.

—Joe Williams

The Private-Public School Debate

Careless measurements give the public the wrong information

According to a recent National Center for Education Statistics-sponsored study, students attending private schools performed better than students attending public schools. But after statistical adjustments were made for student characteristics, the private school advantage among 4th graders disappeared, giving way to a 4.5-point public school advantage in math and parity between the sectors in reading. For 8th graders, after adjustments, private schools retained a 7-point advantage in reading but achieved only parity in math. But, in fact, the study's measures of student characteristics are flawed; using the same data but substituting better measures of student characteristics, we found that three alternative models identified a private school advantage in nearly all comparisons.

—Paul E. Peterson and Elena Llaudet

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Expanded inspections We have conducted thousands of pipeline inspections to assure continued safe operations.

Experts retained We have retained two of the world's foremost corrosion experts and an expert with large infrastructure asset management expertise. They will independently review and make recommendations for improving the corrosion inspections, monitoring and prevention program in place in our Alaska oil fields.

Oil supplies assured and restored We brought in cargoes of crude oil from around the world to replace the temporary loss in supply from Prudhoe Bay, which has now been restored to production.

Independent ombudsman appointed We have appointed former U.S. District Judge Stanley Sporkin to help resolve concerns and issues raised by employees.

External advisory board created We have created an external advisory board to assist and advise top management in monitoring BP U.S. businesses.

Inviting in regulators We are working with the Department of Transportation and state regulators to expand their oversight of our Alaska facilities and pipelines.

Operational advisory board established We have established an internal advisory board composed of 15 senior business leaders to offer recommendations on safety, operational integrity and compliance.

Reaching out to employees We are holding town hall meetings across the country to reinforce our commitment to safety and integrity.

If you'd like to know more about the actions we're taking, please visit bp.com/us

